SILENCE

MAUN

Original Maithili Short Story collection authored by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

Phool Babu Mandal

A Collection of Maithili Short Stories by a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Author

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Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated from the original Maithili by

Phool Babu Mandal

Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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English Translation of the Maithili Short Story collection 'Maun'
Original Maithili Author: Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal
English Translation: Phool Babu Mandal

SILENCE *is the English translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's acclaimed Maithili work Maun. It offers a poignant and compassionate portrayal of rural life, human dignity, and the quiet courage of ordinary people. Through interconnected narratives, the book explores the burden of drought, the silent grief of migration, and the isolation of elders left behind as the world around them transforms. It also pays tribute to the unseen strength of women who hold families together through every crisis.*

Phool Babu Mandal's translation remains true to the emotional depth and earthy simplicity of the original. The prose stays grounded in soil, memory, and lived experience. Each scene urges the reader to observe what is often overlooked. In this world, silence becomes a voice for survival, and small acts of endurance emerge as beacons of hope. SILENCE invites readers to witness the uncelebrated truths of lives that persist without applause.

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Dedication

To the quiet hearts of Mithila,
who carry their worlds without complaint.

To the farmers who wait for rain,
yet rise each morning with unwavering resolve.

To the elderly who watch the village change,
while holding fast to its memory.

To the women whose silence preserves
the dignity of entire families.

To the children who chase hope,
even when the earth is dry beneath their feet.

This book is offered to you
with deep respect for your strength
and for the stories you live each day.

Phoolbabu

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Foreword

Translation is a crossing of linguistic and cultural thresholds in ways that enrich and enlarge the possibilities of both source and target language. It is not simply a substitution of words but an encounter between worlds. It involves reading within an immediate community, attending to its meaning, comprehending not just the experiences, but also the cadences, silences, and the ethical import of what is written, and then rendering them into the receiving language in ways that stretch and adapt it to create novel ways of seeing. Translation thus becomes an act of inviting the readers of the receiving language into the cultural soil of the language in which the stories originated. It is, therefore, an act of creating a shared dwelling of languages.

Translating Indian language texts into English offers these texts an expanded readership and transnational circulation, offering them passage into global literary conversations. It opens up new spaces for the rich oral and scribal traditions in these languages, their sociocultural nuances, and lived realities to travel to, inviting new cultures into dialogue with them, thus creating a dynamic environment for interaction between languages and cultures. It also warrants circumspection – striking the right balance between

distinctiveness and fitting into the idiom of global English, one that needs to be negotiated with care. Translating Indian language texts into English is also a complex and uneven terrain for any translator to negotiate. It is complex in the sense that the history of English in India is also the history of the country's negotiation with colonialism, power, and global dynamics. It is uneven as English translations have been more focussed on certain languages and voices, leaving many unheard.

In translating Maun, a collection of short stories by Jagadish Prasad Mandal, as Silence, Phool Babu Mandal seeks to carry such unheard voices into English – in a literal sense, as well as in a wider, figurative sense. A distinctive voice within Maithili literature, Jagadish Prasad Mandal is a well-known social activist who has actively resisted long-standing hierarchies that structure rural life and the inequities they lead to. He turned to literature in later life, bringing to his writings the same reformist zeal that shaped his activist engagement. His writings portray the moral complexities and ethical conundrums of life in rural Mithalanchal with insight and candour. Maun, thus, is a complex silence. It is a socially grounded voicelessness shaped by gender, caste, and class. Yet, it is an empowering silence that witnesses and bears testimony, and is therefore not passive. Linked to history, power, and circumstance, this silence thus becomes both moral vision and narrative form.

Translating this work and its silences thus becomes a principled responsibility, one that Phool Babu Mandal is attentive to. He engages attentively with these stories, and is cognizant of their silences, which are sometimes the only

available expression for those inhabiting the fringes. He peruses each story with sensitivity and empathy, is responsive to their tone and texture, and renders them from Maithili to English with restraint and understanding.

Phool Babu Mandal's translation is not just responsive to the cadences of the Maithili language, its cultural specificities, or the silences that structure both the thematic and narrative dynamics of the stories. The English of his translations does not force fluency; it is earthy, at times even raw, and might irk a purist, but it is always porous and responsive to the context these stories are embedded in, and therefore well-suited to the task he has taken up. This is not a breezy, readable rendition from one language to another; these stories bring languages and cultures into dialogue, demanding of the reader a certain degree of engagement and involvement.

This is a sincere and thoughtful effort towards bringing an important Maithili work to larger readership. It is representative of the translator's sensitivity towards and respect for his cultural roots as well as his awareness of global realities. It offers insightful observations about the Mithila region, its language, and its literature.

Banibrata Mahanta
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Varanasi
December 2025

Preface

Silence has many registers. It can be a refuge, a wound, a memory, or a quiet pulse that holds a world together. When I first read Maun, the original Maithili collection from which this English volume has been translated, I was struck not only by the restraint of its language but also by the dignity of its people. These stories do not seek applause. They are woven from the everyday breath of life in Mithila, a land shaped by rivers, monsoon, toil, migration, and the quiet heroism of those who rarely feature in grand narratives.

Translating these stories into English has been both a responsibility and a privilege. To translate Jagdish Prasad Mandal is to enter a landscape where silence speaks more truthfully than noise, where the resilience of ordinary people becomes the grammar of survival, and where every scene is steeped in lived experience. His characters inhabit no mythical space. They belong to the lanes and fields of villages that readers in Mithila know intimately. Yet their emotions transcend geography. The anxieties of ageing parents, the fragility of human relationships, the evolving tension between tradition and modernity, the sorrows of migration, and the stubborn will to endure are concerns that speak to humanity at

large.

In this volume, I have tried to preserve Mandal's earthy simplicity and his deep moral vision. The language remains grounded, and the emotional cadence intact. I have sought to let the stories breathe in English while honouring the soil from which they rise. Ornate translations can sometimes polish away the texture of the original. This work seeks fidelity in tone, rhythm, and the unspoken depths that Mandal trusts his readers to perceive.

What binds these stories together is not a single plot or recurring character, but a shared ethical horizon. Across the collection, silence emerges as both theme and method. Some silences are born of suffering, others of humility or wisdom earned over a lifetime. At times, silence appears as resignation. At others, it is the quiet strength that enables one to stand against adversity. Mandal understands that rural life often speaks most profoundly when it speaks least.

To read these stories is to recognise that silence is not emptiness but a form of articulation. It carries what words cannot contain: the weight of memory, the endurance of generations, the muted ache of disappointment, and the unspoken hope that sustains even the poorest of households. In village life, silence is not merely the absence of sound. It is the medium through which dignity survives. Mandal's narrative world reminds us that those who labour the hardest often speak the least. Yet their silence holds the essence of their humanity.

Below, I offer a brief introduction to each story. This is not to summarise them fully, but to prepare the reader for the

emotional and intellectual terrain ahead. The titles themselves, The Droughty Flood, Life Unmoored, Prestige Went to the Water, The Reversed Wind, hint at a world where natural and human forces intertwine. Every shift in circumstance tests the convictions of those who live through it. Each story reveals how fragile the balance of life can be, and how quickly the familiar rhythm of a home, a family, or a village can be unsettled by drought, accident, betrayal, or a sudden turn of fate.

These narratives remind us that rural experience, though often overlooked, is a profound theatre of human resilience. The fields, the riverbanks, the dusty lanes, and the quiet corners of courtyards become stages upon which lives are broken and remade. Mandal portrays his characters without sentimentality. He allows them their flaws, their small triumphs, and their stubborn hopes. In doing so, he creates a moral landscape that is both intimate and universal. Each story becomes a window into the shifting truths of village existence.

Let us now take a closer look at the stories.

The Droughty Flood: The story opens on the calm morning of Anant Chaturdashi, yet its real tension lies beyond ritual. Through an ordinary exchange between the narrator and Ram Lal Bhai, Mandal reveals a disturbing truth. Disaster in the village no longer arrives in familiar natural forms. It is neither a recognisable flood nor a typical drought. Instead, it emerges through human error, official negligence, and the quiet distortion of land and water.

The phrase “droughty flood” captures this paradox. A once-fertile stretch of farmland, long nourished by natural runoff, becomes barren after new roads obstruct the water’s flow. Year after year, the fields stagnate and the soil dies. Eight harvests pass without yielding a single grain. This devastation is not nature’s doing. It is the result of misguided planning and broken systems. The villagers witness the damage but lack the vocabulary to describe it, and within that silence lies a deeper helplessness.

Ram Lal Bhai’s simple, matter-of-fact explanations reveal a man who understands all too well how human decisions have destroyed what generations once protected. His clarity carries sorrow, not resignation.

In the end, Mandal gently contrasts faith with responsibility. Ritual threads may symbolise continuity, but real well-being depends on awareness, accountability, and collective action.

What Have We Gained: The story opens with a sleepless night that mirrors the anxiety of a farmer watching drought slowly dismantle his world. In Mandal’s telling,, the absence of rain becomes more than a natural failure. It erodes the spirit of a rural household where paddy is not just a crop, but food, identity, and the anchor of life itself. As ponds dry up, hand pumps fail, and the land turns barren, the narrator’s private fear deepens into a broader reflection on survival.

A turning point comes when he realises that the crisis is shared. If the entire village suffers together, then perhaps hope must also be collective. This realisation leads him to Hitnath

Kaka, whose quiet wisdom expands the narrative beyond the present. His memories of indigo cultivation during British rule reveal a long history of exploitation. Land was seized, soil was exhausted, and families were pushed into poverty. The present drought is not an isolated misfortune. It is part of a continuous pattern of neglect, where development schemes arrive too late or do not arrive at all.

The title's question, What have the farmers gained?, remains painfully unresolved.

Yet the story does not end in defeat. Hitnath Kaka reminds the narrator that hardship is best met through unity and shared resolve. Mandal closes with a quiet call for solidarity, suggesting that in a landscape shaped by drought and injustice, the only enduring strength lies in the community's willingness to stand together.

The Mango Grove: The Mango Grove is a reflective tale about migration, memory, and the search for one's true anchoring. Mandal follows Someshwar Bhai, who leaves his village believing that only the city can offer dignity. Thirty years in Mumbai bring stability, but also a quiet emptiness. The deaths of his parents and the growing distance from his children gradually reveal how far he has drifted from the world that once shaped him.

The story begins with the stark conditions of Someshwar's childhood village, where education, healthcare, and opportunity were almost nonexistent. Mumbai initially appears as a necessary escape. Over time, however, the city becomes a space of detachment. Family bonds loosen, and the

sense of belonging fades. His father’s death, and the rituals performed in Banarjhulla, confront him with a forgotten sense of continuity and awaken a longing he had tried to silence.

The story also explores the widening gap between generations. Someshwar and his wife live between two worlds, but their children belong entirely to the city. They remain untouched by the memories that still pull their parents homeward.

Through the figure of Gyan Dev Baba, Mandal offers a quiet insight. A mango grove flourishes when nurtured with patience and care. In the same way, a family or community thrives through attention, rootedness, and the acceptance of where one truly belongs. Fulfilment does not come from escape, but from presence.

Life Unmoored: Life Unmoored is a restrained and quietly unsettling reflection on ageing, displacement, and the gradual loosening of social bonds in rural life. Mandal sets the story in the harsh winter of Pausha, a season described so vividly that it becomes a mirror for the emotional climate of the village. Into this cold and muted landscape returns Shyam Kaka, newly retired and carrying a mixture of expectation, uncertainty, and unspoken sorrow. The narrator, Jitan, becomes the doorway through which the reader enters Shyam Kaka’s inner world.

Shyam Kaka’s unease is not professional. He has lived with dignity, excelled in his studies, and served as a respected science teacher. His distress stems from a deeper feeling–that he has not been able to serve his community in the way he

once hoped. It also comes from the painful recognition that the village he has returned to no longer resembles the one he left. His sons have settled permanently in Mumbai. His health is beginning to decline. In six days, not a single neighbour has come to greet him. This silence weighs heavier than the winter itself.

Mandal uses memory to reveal earlier struggles with education, poverty, and the slow disintegration of communal life. Yet a quiet grace remains. Through Jitan's presence, Shyam Kaka realises that even one loyal relationship can help steady a drifting life. The story affirms that true security is not found in wealth or accomplishment, but in the quiet assurance that someone will stand beside us when everything else begins to fall away.

The Peepal Tree: The Peepal Tree explores how a seemingly simple intrusion can grow into a crisis when superstition, collective sentiment, and administrative hesitation overpower an individual's rights. Ravikant Babu builds a house hoping to secure his family's future. During the years he spends away in extended government service, a peepal seed, dropped by birds, takes root in the locked property. By the time he returns, the sapling has grown into a strong, spreading tree whose roots threaten the walls he built with such care.

The greater disturbance, however, is social. The tree has become a site of devotion. Women smear its roots with clay, children offer small prayers, and Sundays turn into informal gatherings. Vendors arrive, rituals form, and a casual habit

hardens into belief. Ravikant's practical concerns begin to appear almost improper in the face of growing reverence. Even his wife fears that removing the tree might offend a deity.

Seeking administrative help proves futile. Officials offer polite reassurances but avoid taking action. The Forest Department declares the tree government property, and political promises quickly dissolve into silence. Mandal shows how public sentiment, when laced with religious devotion, can paralyse institutions and leave the individual isolated.

The peepal tree becomes a metaphor for any social force that begins quietly and then overruns the boundaries of reason, law, and personal space.

Prestige Went to the Water is a sombre meditation on inherited honour, ethical decay, and the fragile continuity of moral values across generations. The story centres on Raghunandan Master Sahib, an elderly schoolteacher whose identity and self-worth are deeply rooted in the legacy of his father's participation in the freedom struggle. Memories of the Salt Satyagraha, defiance against colonial rule, physical punishment, and imprisonment form the moral foundation upon which the family's social dignity has long rested.

This inherited sense of honour is abruptly destabilised when his younger son, Manoj, a government cashier in the irrigation department, is arrested on charges of misappropriating public funds. Mandal frames this incident not as an isolated act of wrongdoing but as a symbolic rupture

between two moral worlds. One generation embraced imprisonment as a badge of conscience and resistance; the next faces it as a consequence of corruption within a hollowed-out bureaucratic system.

The dysfunctional irrigation department, where development exists largely on paper and accountability has eroded, quietly underscores the normalisation of institutional decay. Yet the narrative's emotional force lies not in the mechanics of corruption but in its aftermath. Shakuntala's restrained grief and Raghunandan Master Sahib's inward collapse reveal how public disgrace penetrates the private realm, dismantling a lifetime of moral certainty.

The story culminates in a painful realisation: honour earned through sacrifice can be silently undone, without struggle or defiance. The title captures this irreversible loss, suggesting that once prestige is submerged, it cannot be easily retrieved. Through this quiet tragedy, Mandal poses a disturbing question. Can the ethical capital accumulated by one generation survive in a society where integrity no longer commands respect? This story stands as one of the collection's most unflinching reflections on moral discontinuity, giving the theme of silence a haunting ethical dimension.

The Temple of Shiva: The Temple of Shiva is a quiet yet compelling exploration of social awakening in a remote Himalayan village, where life has long moved at the pace of the mountains and the river beside it. Jagdish Prasad Mandal uses the purity of the Shivganga and the stillness of an ancient

Shiva temple as symbols of continuity. Against this backdrop, he sets a society weighed down by poverty, isolation, and inherited prejudice. The village of Shivpuri, sincere but stagnant, becomes the canvas on which Mandal paints a slow, thoughtful movement toward reform.

At the centre of the narrative stands Manishankar, the village elder entrusted with inviting Radha and Shyam from the more progressive settlement of Vicharpur. Their arrival marks a turning point. Shivpuri is a place where caste barriers remain quietly entrenched, not out of cruelty but out of habit and unexamined belief. Vicharpur, by contrast, has embraced equality, showing that social change becomes possible when thought shifts before behaviour does. This contrast creates the story's central tension–a community that longs for progress but remains unsure how to begin.

The gathering held on Shivratri becomes the emotional core of the story. For the first time in memory, villagers sit together and share a common meal, dissolving untouchability not through debate, but through shared presence. Mandal suggests that the earliest steps toward transformation often come through simple acts that challenge the invisible walls people have lived with for generations.

Through the voices of Sulekshani, Shyam, and Radha, the story deepens into a sharper critique of the prevailing social structure. Shyam reminds the villagers that power rarely yields on its own, and that efforts toward upliftment are often met with resistance. Radha, more reflective, argues that unity and understanding must come before any struggle. Awareness, she insists, grows from lived experience and becomes the source of the inner strength needed to confront

injustice.

Ultimately, The Temple of Shiva is less about religion and more about human dignity. By showing a village awakening to the possibility of collective action, Mandal affirms a simple truth: societies change only when individuals begin to think differently. The story becomes a call to recognise shared humanity, to discard inherited divisions, and to rebuild life on the foundations of unity, clarity, and moral resolve.

A New Beginning in a Withered Life: A New Beginning in a Withered Life follows the fragile yet resilient journey of Ganesh, a schoolboy whose life is shattered in an instant when both parents die in a tragic accident. Mandal presents this loss without melodrama, allowing the stillness of the moment to convey the weight of his grief. The story becomes an exploration of how a life stripped of support can find new direction through compassion and shared responsibility.

The villagers' spontaneous help during the funeral rites reflects Mandal's belief that even in poverty-stricken communities, humanity endures. Their small contributions echo a collective understanding that survival is never an individual task. Headmaster Hemant Babu's sorrow deepens the emotional landscape. Childless himself, he feels Ganesh's loss intimately and embodies the quiet, parental role that teachers often assume in village life.

The turning point in the story arrives with Gopinath's return. A migrant worker hardened by experience, he offers to take Ganesh to Mumbai. His decision is not driven by pity,

but by a commitment to help rebuild the boy's future. His insight–that true charity lies in restoring a life rather than offering alms–becomes the moral centre of the narrative.

Ganesh's disciplined years in Mumbai lead him back to his village as a self-reliant young man. Mandal ends the story with a quiet affirmation: renewal grows from ordinary goodness, patient guidance, and the courage to begin again.

Silence: Silence is one of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's most contemplative stories, shaped not by dramatic action but by the quieter shifts that occur when a person turns inward. The narrative begins with the narrator's return from Biratnagar after a year. He sets out to meet Fachair Kaka, the village's most talkative man, whose endless stories and flowing speech once formed the rhythm of their daily conversations. These memories create the expectation that the meeting will unfold with the same lively spirit as before.

Mandal begins by recreating this world of rural conversation with gentle humour and affectionate detail. Villagers speak in proverbs, repeat old tales, and follow winding paths of thought. This familiar setting becomes the ground against which the story's deeper transformation stands out. When the narrator finally meets Fachair Kaka, he is startled. The man who once spoke without pause now receives him with a quiet, steady gaze and a calm, measured response. His brief remark–that he had been unsettled in mind but is now well–hints at an inner shift that has taken place beyond the narrator's sight.

The turning point of the story arrives when Fachair

Kaka shares an anecdote from the life of Kabir and Farid, two spiritual figures who, upon meeting in Kashi, sat together for three days without speaking. Through this parable, Mandal introduces the idea that silence can be a deeper form of communication than words. The encounter between the two saints becomes a metaphor for a kind of understanding that does not depend on explanation, but on presence.

Fachair Kaka's transformation reflects this insight. He explains that after years of speaking endlessly, he has come to recognise the value of silence. For him, silence is not emptiness. It strengthens knowledge, quietens restless thought, and dissolves the conflicts that arise from ego. His composure and restraint embody the very lesson he tries to express. What surprises the narrator is not only the change in behaviour, but the depth of reflection that now shapes Fachair Kaka's life.

In the end, Silence emerges as a meditation on discipline and awakening. It suggests that the most significant changes in a person's inner world happen quietly, without display. Through a seemingly ordinary villager, Mandal reveals how silence can become a path to clarity, humility, and a more grounded sense of self.

The Reversed Wind: The Reversed Wind offers a finely observed study of human temperament, shifting moral climates, and the quiet tragedies that unfold within ordinary households. Mandal begins with a reflection on virtue and flaw as twin forces within both nature and the human mind. This philosophical lens prepares the reader for a story that

moves not through external drama, but through the slow, inward turning of a life's emotional weather.

At the centre is Shyam Babu, a man shaped by aspiration and gradually worn down by disappointment. From his student days, he believed with good reason that he was destined for a college post. His academic record was outstanding, and his ambitions were sincere. Yet five years of unemployment drained him, and he accepted a middle-school job not out of interest, but out of necessity. Mandal depicts with quiet precision the erosion that occurs when a person's work fails to honour his capacity. The classroom becomes not a place of fulfilment, but a daily reminder of a dream deferred.

Anuradha, his wife, benefits from growing opportunities in women's education and secures a high-school position. Though Mandal avoids sensationalising this difference, he records its subtle effect on the emotional balance of their household. Professional disparity creates a quiet undercurrent of comparison. What should have remained a shared struggle becomes a measure of unequal fortune, and this begins to disturb their domestic harmony.

As retirement nears, Shyam Babu's anxieties sharpen. A reduced income and advancing age make him uneasy. However, Mandal shows that the deeper sorrow lies elsewhere. Shyam Babu has spent his life honouring duty–caring for his parents, performing their rites with devotion, educating his daughters, marrying them with dignity, and raising his sons with the hope of giving them a better future. He has built not only a house, but a moral legacy.

The shock comes when his eldest son confronts him without respect, demanding an account of his life's earnings. Anuradha, in that moment, quietly aligns herself with the accusation. The meaning of the title becomes clear. The reversed wind is not an external misfortune, but the painful turning of one's own family–the collapse of the very relationships he believed he had secured through sacrifice.

Mandal's achievement lies in portraying this deeply human grief without theatrics. He shows that disappointment often arrives not with thunder, but with a soft, piercing shift. The Reversed Wind becomes a meditation on ageing, the fragility of virtue, and the sorrow of realising that a lifetime of goodness does not always guarantee the loyalty of one's own.

Translating these stories into English required far more than a simple focus on vocabulary. Mandal's prose draws its vitality from the spoken rhythms of Mithila, its understated humour, quiet grief, and finely tuned moral awareness. My challenge was to allow English to carry these textures without disrupting the simplicity that lies at the heart of Mandal's craft. The task often demanded listening rather than mere rendering, pausing at the hinges of a sentence to discern not only what the original reveals but also what it chooses to withhold.

Wherever it felt true to the spirit of the narrative, I retained cultural expressions such as the names of festivals, kinship terms, and agricultural idioms. These are the threads from which the characters' identities are woven. While footnotes and a glossary assist the reader, the stories

themselves remain firmly rooted in their native soil. My hope is that English readers might sense, however gently, the pulse of Mithila beneath each line and recognise how local detail can unexpectedly open generous windows onto our shared human experience.

I remain grateful to Pallavi Prakashan for their support and to every reader who approaches these tales with openness. Literature builds bridges across languages and landscapes. In translation, voices grounded in a specific region can travel far beyond it. If these stories reach new readers with even a fraction of the resonance they hold in Maithili, the labour behind this translation will feel deeply rewarded.

This book is dedicated to the farmers, elders, women, and children whose lives breathe through these pages. Their silence is not emptiness but endurance. Their struggles remind us that dignity can survive within constraint and that courage often reveals itself in unnoticed moments. They carry histories shaped by both hardship and tenderness. Their presence offers a quiet corrective to a world that rarely stops for such lives.

I now invite you to step into these worlds, to walk sun-dusted paths, to listen to fears seldom spoken, to witness the small gestures of compassion that sustain a community, and to feel the stillness and depth that silence can hold.

Phool Babu Mandal

12.12.2025

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Translator's Acknowledgements

Translation is a sacred act–an act that draws its strength from divine grace. Therefore, first and foremost, I offer my heartfelt gratitude to the Almighty, whose blessings made this work possible. I am deeply thankful to the author, Shri Jagadish Prasad Mandal, and to Pallavi Prakashan for placing their trust in me and giving me the opportunity to undertake this translation.

The impulse to bring Maithili literature into the English language first took shape during my M.A. studies at the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. I remain profoundly indebted to my teacher, Dr. Umesh Kumar, who taught me Indian Literature in Translation at BHU. A distinguished translator, writer, and critic, his inspiring pedagogy and passion for translation nurtured my interest and sharpened my sensibility in this field. The skills I acquired under his guidance enabled me to bring Maithil voices into a global literary space.

I am forever grateful to my revered teacher, Prof. Banibrata Mahanta, a renowned translator, writer, and social activist. His writings, teaching, and commitment to social service have been a perennial source of inspiration for me. His academic guidance and emotional support, offered with generosity and patience overlooking my flaws, have been invaluable. It is both an honour and a privilege that he has written the Foreword to this translation.

I sincerely acknowledge the support of Maithili language and literature scholars Dr. Shrawan Kumar and Dr. Vineet Kumar Lal Dal, who helped me understand several culturally nuanced Maithili terms. I am equally thankful to Dr. Umesh Mandal, who stood by me like a glowing ember throughout the translation process.

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Phool Babu Mandal

Darbhanga

16 December 2025

The Droughty Flood

☰

Today is Anant Chaturdashi. The ritual of worshipping Anant will take place today. You may call it Anant Puja or Anant Festival. It falls on the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Bhadra. Coincidentally, today, being the seventeenth of September, is also Vishwakarma Puja.

During Anant Puja, people tie a sacred thread, known as Anant, around their arms. There are, however, two kinds of threads: Anant and Phanant. The Anant thread is regarded as sacred, while the Phanant is considered unsacred. The only difference between the two lies in the way the knot is tied. Usually, the thoughtful and devout tie the Anant thread, while women and children tie the Phanant.

In our family, this festival of Anant is not observed. There are many such occasions which, though part of the Hindu tradition, are not celebrated in every household. Just as some people observe particular rituals while others do not, so it is

with us. We do not perform Anant, Chaurachan, Chhathi, or Ghadi.

Most festivals come once a year, fixed to a specific month and lunar date. Yet some stand apart from this order. Chhathi, for instance, is celebrated twice, once during the bright fortnight of Kartik, and again in Chaitra. Likewise, Ghadi is celebrated for two days. Some people celebrate it on Wednesday, so they call it Budhwari Ghadi, while others celebrate it on Saturday, calling it Shaniyahi Ghadi.

Whatever the day and month, the meaning remains the same, for as the old saying goes, "The Lord is infinite, and so are His stories."

Though the Anant festival is not observed in our household, still, being a festival day, I too take a break from my chores. So, today I am celebrating the holiday of Anant Puja in my own way. On such occasions, when a festival is not ours, I usually go to Ram Lal Bhai's house and share in the joy there.

The ritual of Anant Puja takes place early in the day, for every festival has its own sacred hour. Chhathi, for instance, begins on the evening of the sixth day and concludes at dawn on the seventh. Chaurachan and Ghadi are held at dusk, while in the month of Kartik, Lakshmi Puja is performed on the first evening of the new moon, and Kali Puja late at night.

Early in the morning, as the sun rose, I finished

my daily chores, bathed, drank my tea, and set out for Ram Lal Bhai's house.

He was seated before the ritual space, performing the puja, while his children and those of the neighbourhood sat around, watching in silence. By chance, I arrived just as he was reaching the final stage of the ceremony. Absorbed in meditation, he did not notice me, and soon he blew the conch shell with full breath.

The sound of the conch made me feel that the worship was over. Just then, he rose from his seat, still holding the conch, and as I reached the doorway, his eyes fell upon me. He said nothing, knowing well that our family did not observe the Anant festival. With a smile, he began distributing the sacred offerings calling to people.

A little later, we both sat together and shared the offerings.

I do not know exactly when our family stopped observing Anant Puja. Yet one thing is clear, so long as my father lived, the festival was never performed under his watch. Following him, I too have not continued it. Ram Lal Bhai had not yet taken his morning tea. Whether his mind was craving for it or not, only he could tell, but soon after finishing the puja, his wife appeared at the doorway carrying two cups of tea. On the veranda outside the main door, Ram Lal Bhai had arranged his ritual seat. His eldest

daughter, Sunaina, came forward and began clearing up the articles used in worship.

The two of us, Ram Lal Bhai and I, sat on the chairs placed by the doorway and began sipping our tea. The children had gone inside, and Sunaina carried the ritual items into the courtyard.

There had been no rain for weeks, and the season itself felt as if it had turned into the harsh heat of Jeth or Asarh. Though it was still early morning, sweat was already trickling down our bodies. After tea, we both chewed betel leaves. Spitting out the first chew, Ram Lal Bhai said- “Moti, this time has droughty flood.”

At first, I could make nothing of what he meant. It sounded like one of those cryptic sayings from the Mahabharata. I tried to reason it out, but I couldn't. Flood, I thought, when there is too much rain or floodwater destroying the crops, yet none of that has happened. Then how could he call it a flood? Likewise, drought means lack of rainfall, which people call dryness. I asked- “Can you explain what you mean”

Ram Lal Bhai understood my confusion. He said- “Moti, you must be thinking that when the sun scorches, the crops wither, and when the rains pour excessively, they are washed away?”

I nodded- “Yes.”

He smiled and replied- “That is how ordinary people see it. But for me, it is something different.”

Hearing Ram Lal Bhai’s thoughts, my mind began to wander in all directions, yet I still could not grasp what was going on in his mind. So without saying anything, I kept looking at his face. Pointing toward the southern side of his house, he said- “Moti, you know that twenty-five or twenty-six bighas of land stretch in that direction, and among them, we have four bighas, don't you?”

I had seen his fields myself, so I said- “Yes, that’s right."

He continued- “Then tell me, have you seen even a single clump of rice growing fully in that whole stretch of land?”

The image was clear before my eyes. “No, not a single one,” I said.

He asked again- “Now tell me, what would you call this? Was it washed out by the flood or destroyed by drought?”

I had no clear thoughts in my mind, so I said nothing. Ram Lal Bhai's face too had turned a little pale, but he carried his thought forward and said- “Moti, all around that plot there are houses and roads. The people from the village and the nearby hamlets call that land Gorha”

The word Gorha startled me. I was surprised

because Gorha usually refers to cow dung. How could a field be called Gorha I said- “I don’t quite understand, Bhai. Please explain a little.”

Ram Lal Bhai said- “Moti, people call land Gorha when it is more fertile than ordinary soil. Such fertility develops in the kind of land where rainwater from the village and houses gathers and flows. Whether rainfall is scant or heavy, the field that receives that runoff becomes richer and more productive than the rest. That’s why people call it, Gorha."

His reasoning struck me deeply, clearing my confusion. Smiling, I said- “Now I understand, brother.”

Finding his thoughts supported, or perhaps sensing that his inner pain had been understood, Ram Lal Bhai’s face brightened. With quiet satisfaction, he said- “Moti, everyone in the village, including those whose fields lie within that plot, calls it the grain house. They often discuss it, and they understand it too. But still…”

I asked- “But what?”

He replied- “But the fact is, this year makes it eight years now, since eight years that entire plot has produced not a single grain of harvest.”

I knew the condition of that land well enough, though I had never really paid attention to it. Now,

as he spoke, my thoughts began to stir. What was he trying to tell me?

After a pause, he continued- “Moti, look at the formation of the land around here. The ground in our region slopes from north to south. Leave aside the vast plains of the Ganga and Brahmaputra for now; just think of our own villages. In every village, the northern part is higher and the southern part lies lower.”

His reasoning was clear, yet I wanted to hear more. I said- “Please explain a little further, Bhai.”

Hearing my request, Ram Lal Bhai fell into a moment of thought, as if searching for the right way to put things so I could fully grasp them. He knew that mere words could fail if the listener’s understanding didn’t align with the speaker’s intent. Then, in a steady tone, he began again.

“Moti, to our north lies Nepal. When I say ‘our,’ I mean Mithilanchal, or if you wish, Bihar. To the north of it is Nepal. In the east, Nepal stretches beyond Bihar into parts of Bengal, and in the west, it extends a little beyond the borders of Bihar into parts of Uttar Pradesh. But for now, just remember this much, that Nepal lies to our north.

The northern region of Nepal is ringed with mountains, small and large, high and long. Hundreds of peaks rise there, from which countless rivers

emerge and flow southward, eventually joining the Ganga. There aren't just one or two such rivers but dozens of them. Because of these rivers, the very shape of the earth slopes downward from north to south."

Ram Lal Bhai's explanation drew such a clear picture in my mind that I said- "Bhai, I now understand what you mean, that the flow of rivers coming from the north, or even the runoff from rainwater, naturally moves from north to south."

Interrupting me midway, Ram Lal Bhai said- "Moti, don't take it as an absolute rule that water always flows from north to south. Sometimes rivers or surface water flow eastward, sometimes westward, and sometimes even from south to north. You must have heard, and perhaps even seen, that at Sultanpur the Ganga flows northward before turning east again."

I nodded. "Yes, I have not only heard that but seen it with my own eyes."

He continued- "You must have noticed that in some villages the northern side is higher and the southern side lower, while in others it is the opposite, the north is low and the south high, making the water flow northward. That is the natural formation of the land. But let us leave that aside for now and come to our real concern."

I understood some of what he said clearly, some only halfway, and some not at all. My mind was restless. I said-

“Yes, yes, let us leave aside other points for now. Tell me only what concerns us directly.”

Ram Lal Bhai said- “That plot of twenty-five or twenty-six bighas to the south has not yielded even a handful of grain for the past eight or nine years. As every year, the crops wash out. Until last year, farmers still sowed in hope, but the yield kept declining year after year. This time, everyone has given up cultivation altogether. And just look at fate, this year there has not even been enough rain to cause any real flooding that could have damaged the crop.”

I asked- “Why did this happen?”

Ram Lal Bhai replied- “It happened because on the western side of that plot there was already a paved road, but on the remaining three sides, north, east, and south, there were no paved roads. Because of this, the rainwater used to drain naturally toward the south, and there was never any problem with the crops. But when roads were built on all three sides, no outlet for the water was provided. As a result, rainwater began to collect and stagnate. Year after year, the crops began to wash out.

Until last year, farmers continued to cultivate

the land, holding on to hope. But the harvest kept failing. This time, everyone gave up farming altogether, thinking that when the crops had washed out every year, they surely would again. Yet the opposite happened. This year, there was not even enough rain to cause flooding, but the fear in the farmers' minds remained so strong that they avoided sowing altogether. So tell me, would you not call it a droughty flood."

I asked- "When those roads were built, did the farmers say nothing to the contractor who constructed them?"

Ram Lal Bhai said- "Moti, we often think that politicians are the ones responsible for everything, but that is not the whole truth."

I asked- "Then who is?"

He replied- "Real politics is being played by the officials who sit in government offices. The engineer at the subdivision who prepared the estimate for the road project made it in such a way that it favoured his own interests more than the needs of the people. In the plan, he included bridges and culverts and got them approved. But when the actual construction began, the contractor, after treating a few local drunkards to liquor, managed to avoid building any of them and swallowed up all the money meant for those structures. Now tell me, what power does a

poor farmer from the village have against all that?"

I said- "The farmers should take the matter to court."

Ram Lal Bhai replied- "Moti, when the serpent devours its own tail, where will justice come from? If laymen could find justice, would there be so much injustice in the world?"

I said- "Bhai, the truth is, farmers are so helpless that they cannot even realize what is happening to them."

Ram Lal Bhai answered- "How could they understand? Today is the day of Anant Puja, or you may call it the Festival of Eternity. In the scriptures, it is said that on this day people worship to attain eternal happiness or to honor the idea of endless bliss. But what do common people do? They simply tie the thread called Anant around their arms and think their duty is done."

I could not fully grasp his meaning, yet I nodded and said- "Yes, that is exactly what they do."❑

1

What Have We Gained

☰

Yesterday was the full moon of Bhadra, and today is the Purnakal. From this day onward, people begin offering Pind-Daan for their ancestors on the banks of the Phalgu River in Gaya, and in the villages too, the rituals of Jal-Tarpan start.

Last night, I could not sleep at all. It would be easy to say that the heat kept me awake, but that was not the reason. It was a worry that robbed me of sleep. True, it is the season of burning heat, and without an electric fan one might struggle to rest, yet that excuse does not hold for me. I do not have a fan, so what sense is there in blaming something that is not the cause?

The reason for my sleeplessness lay elsewhere. I am a farmer, and farming is my very life. The entire month of Bhadra has passed, yet not a single decent shower has come this year. The paddy fields are drying up. As people in the village say- “It is ruined in

the womb." That is exactly what has happened to the crops. As has begun, the time of panicle of rice growth is here, yet the condition of the paddy is such that even what was transplanted has barely survived, and there is no sign of further growth.

Until the last days of Bhadra, I still held on to hope. People say that Saun and Bhado are the months of rain, so I thought that if even a few good showers came before the month ended, the paddy might still survive. But the rain never came. The worry grew so heavy that, lying on my bed after dinner, I began to think about my life and the world around me.

I am a farmer, and here in Bihar, or rather in Mithilanchal, paddy is our main crop. It gives us rice, and rice is the staple food of this region. When the main source of food itself disappears, what will we eat, and how will we live? That thought gripped my mind so tightly that sleep was lost.

Part of it was worry, and part of it was the stifling heat. There was no trace of wind, and the air felt dead. I kept tossing all night, fanning myself with a palm-leaf fan until my arms ached, yet the body's burning did not ease. Many times I got up and walked outside along the road, but the air there felt even hotter.

Lying awake, I wondered if it was only me who

felt this way or everyone else too. In my mind's eye, I could see that the same condition stretched from village to village, from one region to another. A single year of flood or drought pushes life five years backwards. When such heat comes, it destroys not only the paddy crop but also the winter and spring harvests, for they depend on the moisture left in the soil.

The ponds and wells of the villages have already vanished, and those that remain are drying fast. The heat has been so fierce this year that even the few surviving ponds and wells are nearly empty. The only remaining source of drinking water, the hand pump, is also giving up. With no rain, the groundwater has sunk deep below, the pumps are choking, and when there is no water left to draw, what will people drink?

Tossing and turning through the night, I could not sleep for even an hour. My head felt heavy, and my eyes burned as if someone had rubbed them with chili. As dawn approached, a new thought began to rise in my mind.

It struck me that, as the head of the family, the responsibility rests on my shoulders. The rest of the family depends on me. If I allow myself to be crushed by worry, what will become of them? I realized that this natural calamity, however harsh, must be faced, and it will not end through tears, or by sitting idle, or

by beating my chest in despair. We are human beings; we have reason and understanding. Whatever the time brings, it is we who must decide how to face it.

Another thought came suddenly. I may not yet see a way out for myself, but the village and the community are still there. If everyone is suffering alike, then everyone must surely be looking for a way to live. And if their path exists, perhaps mine does too. Still, nothing concrete came to mind, no clear direction, no idea that could show how to survive.

Then an old saying from the village surfaced in my thoughts- “join hands and do the deed; feel no shame in loss or lead.” I began to think of the elders of the village, and the image of Hitnath Kaka came to me, smiling as always. With that, a quiet faith returned to my heart.

Here in Mithilanchal, this drought is not the first, nor will it be the last. From time to time, droughts have come before. This one has lasted the whole year, but in earlier times there were droughts of two years, three years, even twelve years. I remembered what I had heard, that during the Treta Yuga there had been a twelve-year drought, and in that drought, King Janak himself had taken the plough in his hands, and from that labor was born a daughter like Sita.

The thought of Sita and of that ancient age brought a strange peace to my heart. As the feeling of calm settled within me, the restlessness that had tormented my mind through the night slowly began to fade away.

I thought to myself, what is my age now? I am nearing fifty, that's all. But Hitnath Kaka has already crossed eighty. Whatever hardships and droughts I have faced in life, he must have faced many more. It would be best to go to him and ask- "Kaka, how does one live through times like these?" My mind agreed. Without giving it further thought, I set out for his house.

Because of his age, Hitnath Kaka no longer goes anywhere. He was sitting near the doorway when I arrived. As I approached, said- "Kaka, I bow to you."

Instead of blessing me, he smiled and asked- "Well, Ganesh, has the sun risen in the west today that I get to see you after so many days? Come, come, sit beside me."

Hearing him, I decided in my mind not to drift into casual talk. If I did, I might get lost in other matters and forget the real purpose of my visit. I said- "Kaka, what can I say? Family matters keep me tangled. There is so much work at home that I have no time to go anywhere."

Either understanding my intent or moved by the

same thoughts himself, Hitnath Kaka did not turn to any other topic. He simply said- “Ganesh, this year the times have turned truly harsh.”

Hearing his words, I felt comforted, for it seemed he had raised the very subject I had come to discuss. Showing my own distress, I said- “Kaka, the situation has grown so bad that all hope of survival feels lost. I do not know what to do, or how to go on living.”

Sensing my worry and wishing to lighten my mind, perhaps to offer a bit of comfort, Hitnath Kaka said- “Ganesh, after all, a human being is still human. One does not give up so easily. The same person who can spin a thousand lies to make one lie seem like truth will hardly accept defeat right away. Just as people find a thousand ways to sustain one falsehood, they also search for a thousand paths to overcome a single hardship.”

I nodded. “Yes, that is true. They keep on searching.”

After thinking silently for a moment, Hitnath Kaka continued- “Ganesh, why should thoughts from the past not take shape again in the present? And why should new ideas not arise from the conditions of the present time? Just as a problem of today can be solved by present thinking, so too can a solution drawn from the past sometimes prove equally

useful.”

I said- “Kaka, I do not quite understand.”

He fell silent again for a while, as if arranging his thoughts, and then said- “Ganesh, look at it this way. Neither the thoughts of the past alone can sustain the present, nor can the ideas of the present alone suffice. Life moves forward through the union of both.”

Agreeing with his reasoning, I said- “Yes, Kaka, you are right.”

Turning his thoughts toward the past, Hitnath Kaka said- “Ganesh, leave aside the histories of distant ages. If you start delving into them, you will get lost in the shadows of the past. But the recent history of our own times, the story of farming life as we have lived it, that is what we must know and understand. It is useful.”

I replied- “Yes, not only useful but essential for life itself.”

Hitnath Kaka said- “Let us leave aside the times of the Mughals and the Pathans. For now, let us speak only of what happened under British rule.”

His words made sense to me, so I said- “Yes, that would be best.”

He continued- “When Gandhiji came to Bihar and saw the condition of the farmers here, the

situation was already dire. The peasants of Bihar were burdened with countless problems, and their condition was deteriorating day by day. Their lives had become miserable and pitiable. Of course, it is not possible to discuss every aspect of that situation now, for neither do we have the time, nor can I recall every detail clearly. So let us talk gradually, as our conversation goes on."

I agreed. "Yes, that would be better."

Hitnath Kaka said- "Let us not talk about the system of governance itself. What I wish to speak about are the problems that directly affected the farmers. When British rule became firmly established in our land, the cultivation of indigo began. The traders, who were mostly foreigners, started growing indigo and built factories for its processing.

They began taking over one-third of the land owned by farmers at very low prices. For instance, if a farmer had three bighas of land, one bigha would be seized for indigo cultivation. Indigo required highly fertile soil, and a single cycle of cultivation took two to three years to complete. The crop exhausted the soil so completely that the land lost its fertility, leaving it barren for other crops.

Thus, after one round of indigo cultivation, the traders would move to another part of the land, leaving the used plot barren. The farmer would then

struggle for years to make that land fertile again through labor and care. This was the cruel cycle imposed by the indigo traders."

Hearing Hitnath Kaka's account, it was as if a curtain lifted from before my eyes. I said- "Kaka, until now I never truly understood what indigo cultivation meant, but now I see it clearly."

Hitnath Kaka said- "Ganesh, if you look carefully, you will see that many great problems have always surrounded the farmers of our land. Some of those problems still exist today, or you could even say that they have become worse than before."

I said- "Yes, that is true."

He continued- "We just talked about the cultivation of indigo. If we were to discuss every problem one by one, even a full day would not be enough. So for now, I will briefly mention a few. As time allows, we will talk about the rest later."

I noticed the time; more than an hour had passed. I said- "Kaka, please speak briefly now. Later, when I come again, we will discuss everything in detail and think through all the problems."

Hearing me, Hitnath Kaka fell silent for a moment, thinking deeply. After a while, he said- "Ganesh, during the freedom movement, that is, after 1930, the problems of farmers began to be raised among the leaders of the movement. Our

country is primarily an agricultural land. For the life of a farmer, the value of land is as important as the value of water."

I agreed- "Yes, that is absolutely true."

Hitnath Kaka continued- "Until the country gained independence, as long as foreign rule continued, the problems of farmers were kept aside. Still, the awakening of the farmers brought one great benefit to the movement. The massive participation of the farming population strengthened the struggle for independence. As a result, the British were forced to leave, and our country became free."

Listening to Hitnath Kaka, the uneasiness that had troubled my mind began to fade. Yet one question rose within me, and I asked- "Kaka, even after independence, the problems of flood and drought still remain, do they not?"

Without hesitation, Hitnath Kaka replied- "Yes, they do remain. But the productivity of the fields has increased somewhat, though not as much as it should have. There are reasons behind that too. Still..."

I interrupted- "Still what?"

He continued- "After independence, the zamindari system was abolished. Because of that, the lands that were once being seized from the farmers were saved. However, the irrigation and

industrial projects like the Kosi Canal and the hydroelectric scheme remained only on paper. If both had been fully completed, the prosperity that should have reached our lives never truly came. That is why we have not gained what we should have. There is still a need for farmers to rise together and work toward improving their own lives. The country is ours, the government is ours, so why should the problems not be solved? The stronger the economic condition of the country becomes, the stronger the nation itself will be."

I said- "Yes, that sounds right, but how will it happen?"

Hitnath Kaka replied- "To achieve what we have not yet achieved, we farmers of this country must stand united." ❑

The Mango Grove

After spending thirty years in Mumbai, Someshwar Bhai began to grow weary of both his job and life away from home. It was the time when a strange detachment arose within him from his village, that is, the village of Banarjhulla, and he came from there to Mumbai.

After his college life, that is, after completing his M.Sc., just as he had once felt detachment from the village and an attraction toward Mumbai, in the same way, now after thirty years, he feels a detachment from Mumbai and an affection for the village.

His earlier detachment from the village had grown out of its pitiable condition. At that time, village life was so deprived of the basic necessities of existence that living there seemed more like slow dying than living. There were no schools or colleges for education, no hospitals for treatment, no markets for everyday needs.

Even so, Someshwar Bhai's family was among the well-settled ones of the village. They faced no shortage of food, clothing, or shelter. Yet the kind of life the younger generation aspired to live was not possible there. Someshwar Bhai, though never having been to Mumbai before, had long imagined that city life offered all the comforts and opportunities. Listening to others and reading about urban life in newspapers and magazines, he had come to believe that life in the village was no life at all for a human being.

In the village, Ramkhelawan Kaka, that is, Someshwar Bhai's father, owned ten bighas of cultivable land, along with a one-bigha mango grove and another bigha containing a pond. Because of these, the family never lacked food, fruit like mangoes and jamun, or fish from the pond.

Of course, given the size of the fields, the yield was never very high. The main reason for the low productivity was the old, traditional methods of cultivation that had been practiced in the village for generations. The result was modest harvests year after year. Only in rare seasons, when the weather was favorable, did the crops flourish. Most years, floods or droughts destroyed them.

The same was true of the grove. Though mangoes would sometimes ripen well, there was no modern technique to ensure regular fruiting. So,

some years the trees bore fruit, and in others, they did not. The pond's condition was similar. A few small fish grew naturally in it, but since the pond was never cleaned or managed properly, the yield was never satisfactory.

Still, whatever little they had was enough for a family of five or six members. They made do with what was available. Beyond mangoes, the idea of cultivating other fruits had never really taken root either in that family or in the wider village community. People did not realize that there were many kinds of fruit that could be grown to increase both variety and income.

As with other farmers in the village, Ramkhelawan Kaka had also planted a few scattered trees, one lemon tree, one pomegranate, one tamarind, one amla, one bael. But people, then, had little awareness of the true value or characteristics of different fruits. Most planted trees only by imitation, simply following what they saw others do.

After moving from the village to Mumbai, Someshwar Bhai prospered both financially and intellectually, and with that growth came a renewed affection for his native village. His job at the bank provided a good salary, and over time he found opportunities to engage in several small business ventures as well.

During his thirty years in Mumbai, both of his

parents passed away. His mother died first; three years later, his father followed. When his mother passed, Someshwar Bhai returned to the village to perform her funeral rites, as per his father's wishes. There was no shortage of money, so everything was carried out with dignity and grace.

After completing the rituals and preparing to return to Mumbai, a sudden unease filled his heart. Until then, both parents had lived together in the village, so there had never been any cause for worry. But now things have changed. His father would be alone. Who would cook for him, who would care for him, and how could he, as a son, leave him to live in solitude?

Before departing, Someshwar Bhai said to his father- "Babuji, all these years mother was with you, but now she's gone. You should come to Mumbai with me."

Hearing his son's words, Ramkhelawan Kaka fell silent and began to think deeply. Two images stood before him: the life he had always known in the village and a new life in Mumbai with his son and daughter-in-law. He had spent his entire life amid the rhythm of the village- his home, his fields, his community, his kin, his neighbors. All of it rose vividly before his eyes.

He thought of his situation. Yes, there would be

difficulty with cooking and household chores now that his wife was gone, but otherwise there was no real hardship. He was still strong, his body able, his hands capable of labor. With quiet confidence, he told himself that the same hands that had carried his life's burden thus far could carry it still.

After a long pause, Ramkhelawan Kaka said- "Son, the land on which I have spent my whole life, I cannot leave it now, not at this final stage of life. I will not ask you to give up your work in Mumbai and stay here to care for me; that's your decision. But I cannot leave this village."

After hearing his father's words, Someshwar Bhai did not argue or insist further. He silently accepted his father's decision. Soon after, he, along with his wife and three children, left the village and returned to Mumbai.

Following his wife's death, Ramkhelawan Kaka's health began to decline. Although he was only around sixty, his strength gradually faded, perhaps due to age, perhaps due to loneliness, or perhaps simply because there was no one beside him anymore. Day by day, new ailments took hold of his body. For as long as his strength allowed, he managed to take care of himself, but within three years, his life had become unsteady and frail.

When he could no longer manage, he sent word

for his daughter, who lived with her in-laws. Yet, as often happens, he considered her to be part of another household now, and she too felt the same. Even so, Subhadra came to her father's house with her four children.

Ramkhelawan Kaka's condition worsened rapidly. At last, when Subhadra realized that her father would not survive, she called her brother in Mumbai and said- "Bhaiya, Babuji will not live long. Come home as soon as you can."

Someshwar Bhai, who had already been feeling a slow pull toward the village in his heart, needed no persuasion. The next day, he took leave from the bank and, with his entire family, boarded the train for the village.

But fate was unkind. Before he could even reach home, before his eyes could see his father alive one last time, Ramkhelawan Kaka passed away.

The cremation was performed the following day. The next morning, Someshwar Bhai sat alone on the veranda, lost in thought, while the elders and old acquaintances of the village came one after another, offering condolences and speaking softly of the past.

On the tenth day, after the ritual of Nah-Kesh, the rites of the śrāddha-karm began. Until the ceremony was completed, Someshwar Bhai received such sincere help from relatives and neighbors that

not a single difficulty arose. Just as his mother's funeral rites had been conducted with dignity, so too his father's were completed with due honor.

In the Maithil tradition, a year after a person's death, the chhāyā ritual is observed on the same date of passing. During this ceremony, at least one Brahmin or guest is fed in the name of the departed soul. After that, every year, on the death anniversary, the varshīk karm and ritual meal are also performed. Along with these, during the dark fortnight of the month of Ashwin, known as Pitṛpaksha or Mātṝnavami, offerings for ancestors are made again. Until then, Someshwar Bhai had known little about these customs, which he learned from his cousin, Lakhan Kaka.

Five days after completing his father's śrāddha-karm, Someshwar Bhai returned to Mumbai. Yet, once back, the changing image of the village kept surfacing again and again in his thoughts.

By now, twenty-five years had passed since he had first gone to Mumbai. During this time, he had married off his eldest son after completing his education. His other two children, the middle daughter and the youngest son, were still studying. The daughter was in her final year of college, and discussions of her marriage had already begun. The youngest son had just entered college.

Through twenty-five years of life in Mumbai,

Someshwar Bhai had matured in both outlook and understanding. Many of the beliefs that had once bound his mind had faded, and new ones had emerged in their place. Thoughts that had never before occurred to him now arose naturally, bringing to life before his eyes a clear panorama, from his parents and the old village life, to his own family, his wife, and the lives of his three children, stretched like an unbroken thread from the village to the city.

Between two ways of living, there was a clear divide. Someshwar Bhai's parents had lived entirely in the world of the village, while he and his wife had belonged partly to the village and partly to the city. But their children had grown up knowing only one kind of life, the fully urban one.

Then came an unexpected turn. The eldest son, Rudradev, got a job in a bank and married a Maithil girl from another family living in Mumbai. His wife also worked as a teacher in a private coaching institute. Life went on at its own pace. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. By now, thirty years had passed since Someshwar Bhai first came to Mumbai. Only three years of service remained before retirement.

One day, a sudden thought struck him. The long stream of family life, which had flowed unbroken from generation to generation, seemed to have stopped. The pull of the village, too, had been

growing stronger in his heart. Sitting alone in his room, he found himself moving between the past and the future. His thoughts grew so intense that he made up his mind- "Tomorrow I will go to the bank and submit my application for voluntary retirement." His resolve deepened, and calling out to his wife, he said-

"The day after tomorrow we are going to the village. Start preparing for the journey."

Lalita was stunned. For a moment, her thoughts scattered in confusion. She finally asked- "How did such an idea suddenly come into your mind?"

Someshwar Bhai said nothing. Seeing him silent, Lalita too fell quiet.

The next morning, he went to the bank and submitted his retirement papers. He told none of his friends or well-wishers in Mumbai about his decision. Only his eldest son was informed. Someshwar Bhai said to him-

"Son, tomorrow I am leaving for the village for good. You have your own work and your own life here, so think for yourself and do what you feel is right."

Hearing his father's words, Rudradev said nothing. Many questions rose in his mind one after another, but he remained silent.

On the third day, as Someshwar Bhai prepared

to leave for the village with his wife, he turned once more to his son and said-

"Son, you have everything you need here. Your sister is in her final year of study, and your younger brother has just entered college, so he too will stay here for now. Later, as things unfold, we will stay in touch and talk as needed."

Rudradev again gave no reply. He simply listened to his father's words quietly and stood still, speechless.

After returning to the village, Someshwar Bhai's mind began to wander through memories of his old life. Yet, the village felt strange and distant to him, like the weak warmth of the winter sun that cannot pierce through the fog. The path ahead seemed blurred, uncertain.

He reflected that the world he had left behind thirty years earlier was no longer the same. The thoughts, values, and ways of life of that time had changed beyond measure. A sudden realization came to him that a human being is meant to live among others, not in isolation like some wild creature. Now that he was back in the community of his village, he would stay here for whatever time life granted him.

As he looked around the village, his gaze fell upon the changing flow of generations, the fading of

the old and the rise of the new. Among those familiar faces, his eyes rested on Gyan Dev Baba.

He remembered how, when he had first left for Mumbai, he had touched the old man's feet to seek his blessing. Gyan Dev Baba had smiled and said- "Son, wherever you go, may you live in peace."

The moment Someshwar Bhai recalled Gyan Dev Baba's blessing- "Wherever you live, live in peace," his heart grew restless. He thought, Baba had blessed me to live in peace wherever I go, but where was that peace? His own mind answered softly, the first thing to do is to visit Baba.

It felt necessary, for Baba, now around eighty or eighty-five, had spent his entire life in the village. Who else could better understand what the village had become?

Though the courtyard and house were still covered with dust and fallen leaves, Someshwar Bhai's resolve gave him strength. He thought, I will clean, repair, and rebuild everything with my own hands. If I have returned to the village, then I must truly live here.

Scenes from his past began to move through his mind like a film reel. My ancestors lived in this very house, generation after generation. Why should I not continue that life? The desire to stay in the village filled him with a new energy. There is nothing

in this world that a determined man cannot do, he told himself. His financial condition was stable enough now to build a good house and live comfortably.

It was around four in the afternoon when Someshwar Bhai set out to visit Gyan Dev Baba. The old man was sitting on his veranda, playing with his great-grandchildren. Someshwar Bhai walked up to him, bent down, and touched his feet.

“Baba, it’s me, Someshwar,” he said.

Hearing the name, Baba tried to recall. His eyesight had weakened, and many years had passed since they had met. After a moment’s pause, he said slowly- “Son, I cannot remember clearly.”

Someshwar Bhai then introduced himself in detail. When Baba understood who he was, he smiled faintly and said- “People everywhere are leaving the village for the cities, and you, how is it that you are coming back in the opposite direction?”

Someshwar Bhai smiled and replied- “Baba, you are a man of great experience. But my heart has made up its mind. I want to live in the village now. This is where I belong.”

Gyan Dev Baba asked-

“Will you really like living in the village?”

Someshwar Bhai replied-

“Whether it feels pleasant or unpleasant

depends only on the state of one's mind."

Hearing this, Baba laughed heartily and said-

"Son, that very thought is the essence of understanding life. In the Ramayana it is written, 'Jahan basi tah sundar desh', wherever you live, that place becomes beautiful. There is no land that is inherently beautiful or ugly. It becomes beautiful or ugly depending on how it is cared for."

Someshwar Bhai thought to himself that there was no need to ask Baba anything. The old man had seen and lived through everything. Without being asked- he would speak, and within his words lay all the wisdom one needed. Whatever seemed meaningful for his own life, he would take to heart.

He said simply,

"Baba, I seek your blessings."

Gyan Dev Baba smiled and said-

"Son, the tradition of giving blessings and initiations have spread everywhere in society nowadays. But I have neither given blessings nor initiations to anyone. What I offer is only a thought, a way to live. As one's mind perceives, so one's life becomes.

Just as a mango grove, when rooted deeply in the earth and tended with care, yields sweet fruit in abundance, so it is with family and with life itself. The more care, devotion, and labor you give, the sweeter

the fruit you will taste. What more is there to say about this world than that?

Since you have chosen to return to the village, prosperity will surely find you. The rest we will speak of when the time comes.” ❑

Life Unmoored

☰

Pausha month. The Til-Sankranti festival hasn't come yet- eight days to go. A cold wave has been blowing for twenty days. The sun is nowhere to be found. Day looks like night. Some folks have begun to worry that perhaps the sun will not rise at all. The cold, too, is harsher than in other years. On the sixth day, Shyam Kaka retired and he and his wife came back to the village.

When I heard Shyam Kaka had returned, the thought came to go and ask after him. Truth is, that wish had stirred in me the very day he arrived, but the pace of time turned so unkind that I never quite found the courage to step out. Then my own mind said: if time keeps running like this, I'll never make that visit. Time gives no guarantees. The cold wave may end, or it may not; who can say? I've seen winters when the chill clung on for months. Until now I kept hoping that after a few days the cold

would break, but it hasn't. Each day bites a little harder. From past to present, seasons have always had their own shape, their own script. Thinking of that, I suddenly decided I'll go meet Shyam Kaka.

I wrapped my ears with a woolen head-band, threw a thick shawl over my shoulders, and set out for Shyam Kaka's house. It was that ragged, half-light of morning when the mist began to loosen, around nine o'clock.

When Shyam Kaka's father was alive, their courtyard used to be wide and spacious. The walls were made of rough bricks, and the roof was covered with thatch and ash. The big old verandah was demolished, and in its place, Shyam Kaka built a small room-like verandah, hardly twelve feet long and about eight or nine feet wide.

When I reached Shyam Kaka's house, I saw both husband and wife sitting on the same cot in that small room, the one by the doorway, wrapped in quilts, talking softly. The room had just enough space for two chairs, a table, and two cots. As I entered, I greeted them and sat down on the other cot. For a moment, I thought of sitting on one of the empty chairs, but then said to myself, better to sit on the cot, it feels warmer with the shawl on.

Shyam Kaka turned to Gauri Kaki and said-

"Make some tea."

The moment he said so, Gauri Kaki went to the small open space beside the door to prepare it. Because of the cold, she had kept all her things for making tea, the stove, kettle, and jars, right there near the doorway.

I sat quietly, thinking. Shyam Kaka had returned to the village after retirement; surely he would talk about his life, the sweet and the bitter. Why should I ask? Once our conversation deepened, if something wasn't clear, I could always inquire then. Perhaps because of the cold, or for some other reason, he only acknowledged my greeting with a faint blessing and said nothing more.

I began to feel he was weighed down by something inside, that maybe he didn't wish to speak. Yet another thought came, even if he didn't start, I could always draw him out gently.

Meanwhile, Gauri Kaki finished making the tea. She poured it into three cups, handed two to her husband and herself, and gave me the third. Then she put away the stove and kettle neatly in their places, exactly as they had been before.

The three of us began to sip tea together. With every sip, a soft warmth spread through our bodies, chasing away the morning chill little by little.

After about half a cup of tea, Shyam Kaka spoke- "Jitan, all that I had understood till now, in

that…"

His words trailed off. I couldn't make sense of what he meant. How could I? He hadn't completed the thought. I, too, said nothing, but the curiosity to listen stayed alive within me. So I kept my eyes fixed on him, waiting.

After a short pause, he began again.

"Jitan, my life has passed, meaning the working years of my life are over. Yet, I feel I could not be of any real service to the people of this village."

Hearing this, a string of thoughts stirred in my mind. Wasn't the service itself of many kinds? Still, I told myself not to judge without hearing him out. If I started thinking on my own and his meaning turned out to be different, our thoughts would never meet. Better to let him speak fully first, then I could think it over. So I asked-

"What do you mean, Kaka?"

He replied-

"Jitan, you may or may not have noticed, but let me tell you everything from the beginning."

Listening to him, I thought, once he begins from the beginning, everything will become clear, the whole story of his life, what went right and what went astray. And when I see where the path turned wrong, I can ask again and again, till I understand what kept him from doing what he wished, or why he

chose not to do it. I said gently- “Kaka, the times have turned such that our hands and feet can hardly do anything now. Even here, I feel the whole body weighed down; it would be the same at home. So I don’t see any fault of yours in it. Still, please tell me clearly what you feel you left undone. I’ll listen and think over it too, what you wanted to do and what you could not.”

People often say that everyone talks about sorrow but few speak of joy. Perhaps that was true for Shyam Kaka as well. He began-

“Jitan, today’s times have changed. People move here and there for jobs, but such fortune never came to me.”

Without thinking too much, I said- “That’s a matter of fate, Kaka. For some, things fall easily into place, while others spend a lifetime trying without success.”

At the word “fate,” or perhaps for some other reason, Shyam Kaka’s face grew heavy. He said quietly-

“Jitan, you might not even have been born then. I’m talking about thirty-five or forty years ago.”

I interrupted gently- “I must have been born by then, but I was too small to understand anything.”

He nodded- “Yes, you might have been born, but you wouldn’t have known the world yet.”

I said- “If you explain clearly, Kaka, I might at least guess what you mean.”

He began again- “When I was studying, there were hardly any schools around here, let alone a college. In those days, even counting all the high schools in our region, you could do it with your fingers.”

I already knew that in 1940–41, only C.M. College had opened in Darbhanga, and later R.K. College in Madhubani. Back then, Madhubani wasn’t even a separate district. It was only in 1972 that Darbhanga district was divided into three, Darbhanga, Madhubani, and Samastipur.

I said- “Yes, that’s true. I’ve heard the same.”

Shyam Kaka said-

“Our family was well-settled, but there was no high school or college near our village. So I had to stay in a hostel from high school all the way through college.”

I replied- “After India gained independence, that is, after 1947, more colleges and high schools began to open.”

He seemed pleased with my observation and continued- “Whenever there were long vacations, like during summer or Durga Puja, I came home. Otherwise, I seldom visited, maybe for a day or two at most. On rare festive occasions, I came back. My

father used to send me my monthly expenses himself.”

I said- “At that time, when you were in high school, there must have been hardly one or two people in the entire village who had even seen a high school, let alone a college.”

Shyam Kaka nodded.

“Yes. When I was in high school, there were only three high schools in the entire district as it exists today. There were several Sanskrit schools and a few advanced institutions, but the students of only one or two castes studied there, not ordinary ones.”

Knowing the historical background, I said-

“Yes, that’s true.”

Shyam Kaka went on,

“When I was in high school, I was the only student from our village.”

I had some idea of that, yet, taking him as a direct witness, I asked-

“No one else from the village studied there?”

He replied- “No, no one else did.”

To understand more clearly, I asked-

“Why wasn't there another, Kaka?”

He said- “Jitan, your question is fair. Times have changed now, but back then, our village was sunk in poverty. Only three or four families could afford to

cook twice a day and eat to their fill. The rest were so poor they had no proper house to live in, no adequate clothes to wear, and not even enough food for two full meals.”

Seeing his thoughts drifting toward the past again, I said-

“Kaka, let those things be. What is gone is gone. Think about your present life now.”

Shyam Kaka replied-

“Jitan, I’ve retired from service and returned to the village. After all, this is my own village. Everything my forefathers owned is here. So naturally, this is where I belong. But.”

He stopped. Though he had spoken at length, something remained unspoken within him, something that would not cross his lips. He ended only with that one word, but, and fell silent.

Seeing him quiet, a thought came to my mind. When water enters the ear while bathing, it won’t come out easily unless more water is poured in to flush it out. Just so, I said-

“Kaka, when educated people like you live in the village, only then can the village truly progress.”

He replied softly,

“Living in the village brings fear.”

The word fear stirred many thoughts within me.

Still, keeping them to myself, I asked-

"What kind of fear, Kaka?"

I could more or less guess the reason, but I wanted to hear it in his own voice. So I sat quietly-waiting.

He said-

"Jitan, you know both my sons work in Mumbai. I've heard they've each bought a flat there, and their children study in English-medium schools. Tell me now, will they ever come back to the village?"

I said-

"No, Kaka, they probably won't."

He sighed and continued,

"Now tell me, both of us, my wife and I, are over sixty. When I first got admitted to school, my father reduced my age by three years to make me eligible."

Hearing "three years reduced," a thought rose in my mind. This practice of lowering one's age on school records had long existed among certain castes, but I said nothing aloud. I only remarked,

"Yes, that means you must be over sixty now. And day by day, age will only move further downward."

My words seemed to please him. He said-

"Until now, my wife and I were healthy enough, so doing daily work never felt difficult. But now, we'll

soon begin needing help from others. And who will help us then?"

Listening to his worries about old age, my own heart softened. To ease his mind a little, I said-

"Kaka, what is written in fate must be lived through, isn't it?"

But Shyam Kaka, ever the believer in action rather than fate, replied-

"Jitan, there is no such thing as fate. Life has its own rhythm. Whoever is born must die. A child is born, grows slowly, becomes an adult, then old age arrives, and after that comes death. Until old age sets in, people live in a rising phase of life, with little illness or pain. But once old age comes, the body weakens, and diseases begin to strike."

As he spoke, tears welled in his eyes. He wiped them gently with the edge of his dhoti. Then, steering the talk back, I asked-

"Kaka, I still haven't understood what kind of fear you meant."

He answered,

"Jitan, it's the fear of the people in this village."

His words stirred a faint recognition in me, though I kept quiet and asked-

"Why so, Kaka?"

He said- "Jitan, my whole life was spent as a

high school teacher. You might know it or not, but let me tell you. From the time I entered high school, I always stood first in class. I passed matriculation in the first division. I was a science student. Even in college, my results stayed the same. I did my honors in physics. Before the B.Sc. results were even out, I had already been appointed as a science teacher in a high school."

I couldn't help saying- "Wonderful!"

Shyam Kaka said-

"After five years I completed my teacher training. The school where I taught was sixty or sixty-five kilometers away from the village, so none of the village children studied under me. Because the school was so far, I remained away from the people here. No one in the village ever really benefited from me."

By now, I understood the true cause of his inner fear. Still, to comfort him, I said-

"Kaka, even if no one benefited, what does it matter? A person who does good doesn't do it for reward. He helps others because he sees it as his duty."

He smiled faintly and asked- "How many people really have such a nature?"

I replied- "Kaka, there are three kinds of people in society. The first are those who consider service to

others as their duty, without expecting anything in return."

He interrupted,

"Yes, I agree with you, but how many such people exist? Most people today think it's clever to get their work done by others."

I said-

"Yes, that too is true. Most people act like traders- they serve others only to receive service in exchange. Yet there are still a few, though their number is small, who help others selflessly, without hoping for anything back."

Shyam Kaka nodded slowly.

"Yes, I accept that. But the way society has changed, people no longer wish well for anyone. There was a time when seeing someone else succeed brought joy. Once that was just a saying, but now it has become a way of life that as pigeon peas and lineages melt, so it seems more tasty. When such a tendency has taken root even within a single family line, what can one say about others or about the wider community?"

Even after observing society's behavior, I too have often felt disheartened, but how could I say it aloud when the entire community itself seems to have grown shallow? Turning the discussion in another direction, I said- "Kaka, society is still the

same at its core. People still wish for their own well-being. So, whatever doubts trouble your mind, try to let them go."

Shyam Kaka replied-

"It's been six days since I came back to the village after retirement. In all this time, not a single person has even come to greet me. You are the first one to visit."

I said-

"Kaka, the times are harsh right now. Look at this cold wave- no one wants to step out of the house. Once the season changes, everything will be fine."

With a tone of quiet despair, he said-

"Jitan, society is greater than any individual, and I've always respected it. But now..."

I said gently-

"Kaka, there will always be all kinds of people in society, but even then, everyone somehow manages to live their life."

He replied-

"Yes, they do live, but wouldn't it be better if everyone lived together in harmony?"

I said-

"Of course. But even if you wish for it, society cannot always match that wish. It's always been this

way. In every era, there have been those who help and those who harm. And those who shape society have spread such a net of confusion that everywhere we see conflict, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes in the name of caste. Something or the other keeps exploding all the time."

Shyam Kaka didn't speak, but he nodded in quiet agreement. His face looked dim, as though he were a lost traveler, uncertain of his path.

I said-

"Kaka, we cannot carry the burden of everyone in the village, but whenever you need help, please tell me. I'll do whatever I can."

Smiling faintly, Shyam Kaka said-

"Jitan, if in life one can find even a single person or a single family to stand by them, that alone is enough to cross the river of existence." ❑

The Peepal Tree

☰

When only a year and a half remained before Ravikant Babu's retirement, he decided to rebuild his flood-damaged house. He constructed a clean, polished two-storied home with eight rooms in total, four upstairs and four below. There were two main entrances: one opening into the drawing room, the other leading toward the kitchen. Each floor also had a bathroom and two toilet rooms.

Ravikant Babu had two sons and two daughters. Both daughters were married and living with their husbands, while both sons worked in factories in Delhi. Though the sons lived in the city with their own families, Ravikant Babu built the village house with faith in the future, wanting to fulfill his parental duty before old age overtook him.

Coincidentally, after his scheduled retirement, he received a two-year extension of service. The shortage of staff in both central and state government departments was so severe that his

term was prolonged. With that, he locked his new village house and continued living in his government quarters.

In the village, renting out a home was uncommon, and besides, he feared that if a tenant ever refused to vacate, it would lead to needless trouble. So he thought it better to keep the house locked.

Over time, the house stood deserted, its doors sealed, its verandas silent. Stray dogs and birds made it their shelter. Sparrows and mynas fluttered about, feeding on berries of the nearby banyan, peepal, and kadam trees, perching along the walls and eaves. The seeds they dropped sprouted in cracks and corners of the walls.

Most of those saplings dried up, but one survived, the peepal tree near the entrance. Year after year, it grew stronger, its roots gripping the walls, its branches spreading wide. The house that Ravikant Babu had built for his family now belonged to that peepal tree, standing there like a living soul beside an empty home.

Ravikant Babu had stopped visiting the village altogether, and there was no one else to look after the house. He believed, quite firmly, that since the house was locked, it was safe.

Two years passed after the construction, and by

then the peepal tree had grown dense and tall. Women of the village and many children began pouring water at its roots. They cleaned the area, smeared the base with clay, and built a small earthen platform around it. After bathing, the women and children would sit there reciting the Hanuman Chalisa and Durga Saptashati. Some tied red threads around the trunk, others wrapped strips of red cloth around it just above the roots.

On ordinary days, only a few came, but every Sunday the place turned into a small fair. Wherever people gather, shops and bustle soon follow. The same happened here. Two or three vendors selling murmura and kachri, and one tea seller, began setting up their stalls every Sunday morning. Slowly the whole scene changed.

The times may belong to the twenty-first century, but people remain caught in superstition. The worship and rituals only kept increasing. Many village women began standing before the peepal tree, making vows and seeking blessings.

Ravikant Babu knew nothing of any of this. To him, the house was still locked and safe, and so he lived in complete peace of mind.

Ravikant Babu's service finally came to an end. After retiring and returning to the village, the first thing that caught his eye was the peepal tree. The

tree had grown past the first floor. Standing close to it and looking at its roots, he saw that the roots were pressed against the house wall, some burrowing partly inside and some running along the outside. If the tree were left as it was, in a few days it would spread so much that it would cast deep shade over the courtyard and soon become dangerous for the house. Not only that, as the trunk thickened and the tree grew taller, there would be the risk of serious damage to life and property in strong winds. Without telling anyone, he stood by the tree and thought over what to do.

After thinking for some time he decided it would be best to cut the tree down.

He woke his wife with a bit of noise and said- “If we leave this peepal tree it could cause grave danger later.”

Like other village women, his wife Aparajit also folded her hands in front of the tree and said- “This is a peepal tree. Gods and goddesses dwell on it. It is not right to cut it down. See how people set up small shrines on such trees and worship them. We should let it be.”

Ravikant Babu’s resolve wavered a little at her words, so he hesitated to decide straightaway. In his mind, the danger of the tree posed was clear, but when he listened to his wife the thought flickered

away. He could not bring himself to act; he kept wavering. When he leafed through the pages of possible problems the tree might cause, the danger became plain. In just two years the tree had grown so large; in five years it would be far bigger and its branches thick and menacing. So if they cut it out by the root now, there would be no future hazard. Going back to his wife he said again- “It will be better to cut the tree down.”

Hearing her husband’s words, Aparajita said-

“Don’t make such a mistake. What if some deity resides in that tree? If anything bad happens, what will you do then? People will say it’s your own doing and your own fate to suffer it.”

Listening to her, Ravikant Babu’s mind also wavered. What if she was right? Then another thought came to him: there is a Forest Department for such matters. Why not speak to them and explain everything?

The next day, Ravikant Babu wrote an application addressed to the Forest Department officer and went to the Sub-Divisional Office. He explained his entire situation to the S.D.O. while submitting the application.

After hearing everything, the S.D.O. assured him-

“Proper action will be taken.”

This assurance gave Ravikant Babu some relief. At least the responsibility had now passed from his shoulders. The S.D.O. had promised that the work would be done within fifteen days. Ravikant Babu returned home and told his wife everything.

Fifteen days passed, but there was no action from the Forest Department. On the sixteenth day, he went to the office again and said to the S.D.O.-

"You had given me fifteen days' time, but nothing has been done."

The S.D.O., evading the matter, said-

"At present, we're busy with the tree census. Workload has increased so much that your case got delayed due to the holidays."

Ravikant Babu asked-

"Then when will it be done?"

The S.D.O. replied- "Within five days your matter will be settled."

On the fourth day, two employees from the Forest Department arrived at Ravikant Babu's house. Without saying much, they inspected the tree, carved a number into its trunk, noted it down on paper, and said to Ravikant Babu-

"Now this tree belongs to the government, so there's nothing to worry about."

Ravikant Babu, his voice trembling, said- "But I

had submitted an application to the S.D.O. to cut down the tree and had even explained it in person.”

One of the staff members replied casually- “If the tree were dry or dead, we could have permitted it to be cut. But since it’s green and alive, how can it be felled?”

Hearing this, Ravikant Babu was stunned. He kept staring at the staff members, speechless. They soon left without another word.

He turned to his wife and asked-

“What do we do now?”

Smiling faintly, Aparajita said-

“Who can stop fate? Whatever is destined will happen. Why trouble yourself unnecessarily?”

Her words, coming after the indifference of the forest officers, burned within him. Anger flared, and for a moment he felt like scolding and slapping her, but considering her age and out of respect for public decency, he said nothing.

Time, as always, moved on. A month passed. When no action was taken by the Forest Department, Ravikant Babu thought again. If he left the tree alone, he would be knowingly inviting danger in the future.

After much thought, he decided to approach the local MLA. He knew well that the MLA’s right-

hand man, Maksoodan, was his neighbor. Both belonged to the same political party, and during elections Maksoodan had worked tirelessly for the MLA. Ravikant Babu thought, perhaps through him, something might finally move forward.

Ravikant Babu told Maksoodan everything in detail. After listening carefully, Maksoodan suggested they go to Patna. The next day, both of them left for the state capital and met the MLA.

Ravikant Babu narrated the entire issue, the tree, the danger to the house, the indifference of the local officials, and his growing helplessness. The MLA smiled and said reassuringly-

“For such a small matter, why did you come all the way to Patna? You could have just called from the village, and it would have been taken care of. Anyway, I am not going to the constituency right now. I will speak to the District Magistrate and make sure your problem is solved within eight days.”

Hearing this promise, Ravikant Babu felt relieved and happy. He returned to the village with renewed hope.

But eight days turned into fifteen, and still nothing happened. The tree’s roots were thickening inside the wall, and seeing both the indifference of the administration and the false assurance of the MLA, Ravikant Babu burned within. The thought of

the danger that loomed ahead only deepened his unease. He decided he could no longer sit quietly.

He resolved to go straight to the District Forest Office himself.

The next morning, Ravikant Babu reached the office. Though he did not personally know anyone there, his long years of service had taught him how to present a problem properly. He wrote out a clear application and handed it to the District Officer.

The officer glanced through it and asked curtly-
“What exactly is your problem?”

Ravikant Babu explained everything from the beginning, the growth of the tree, its damage to the wall, his earlier petition to the S.D.O., the MLA’s assurance, and how nothing had been done. He ended by saying wearily-

“Sir, after trying everywhere and getting no help, I have finally come to you.”

The officer leaned back and said with a shrug-

“And what can I do?”

Ravikant Babu said-

“Please allow the tree to be cut.”

The officer replied-

“When people of the village are performing worship there, it becomes a matter of faith. Where faith is involved, what can the administration do?

Moreover, the tree has already been numbered by the Forest Department. Once that happens, it not only means the tree cannot be cut, but its protection also becomes the government's responsibility."

Hearing this, Ravikant Babu felt his thoughts begin to wither inside. Still, gathering some courage, he said-

"The question of faith arises only where public property is concerned. This matter is not public; it is personal."

The officer responded-

"Whether the issue is personal or collective, once it is tied to faith, there is nothing we can do."

Ravikant Babu said firmly-

"Why can't you do something? My personal rights are being violated. When an individual's rights are threatened, isn't it the government's duty to intervene?"

Hearing his words, a flicker of thought passed through the officer's mind, that there should indeed be harmony between governance and the people. Yet, given the kind of environment that had taken root, maintaining such balance seemed nearly impossible.

Caught between duty and convenience, the officer said at last- "All right, you may go now. The day after tomorrow, after ten in the morning, I will

come to your house and see for myself. After that, whatever seems appropriate will be done.”

Assured once again, Ravikant Babu returned home. His heart was heavy, and his face reflected his disappointment.

Then, as if salt had been sprinkled on an open wound, his wife asked gently-

“What happened?”

Ravikant Babu, already burning inside, glanced up at her with tired eyes, then looked down at the ground in silence. ❑

Prestige Went to the Water

☰

The sun was sinking low. Its last rays, rising slowly from the earth, were taking the upward path into the sky. Birds of the air, too, were leaving behind their day’s wanderings, returning home through the lanes of the evening sky. Some had already vanished into the distance; others were still preparing to go.

Raghunandan Master had just finished his evening chores and sat down on the small wooden cot by the courtyard door when Shakuntala appeared, holding a brass plate filled with roasted rice flakes. The mixture carried the smell of salt, ground pepper, and mustard oil, the familiar scent of a simple, homely comfort.

The master's eyes fell upon the plate in his wife’s hands. He was past eighty now; the lines of time had deepened on his face, but his eyes still glimmered with quiet understanding. He had eaten more than half of the roasted flattened rice when

suddenly a young man appeared at the gate and said- his voice trembling-

"Your son has been arrested. He's been taken to jail."

Raghunandan Master chewed the handful of roasted flattened rice hurriedly, swallowed it, and fell silent. In the meantime, the stranger who had brought the news had already gone. The face was unfamiliar, and the Master could not find the words to ask anything. He had simply listened. When the man left, Master turned to his wife and said quietly-

"Did you hear what your son has done?"

Raghunandan Master had two sons. The elder was a teacher at the high school; the younger, a cashier in the subdivision office of the Irrigation Department. Hearing her husband's words, Shakuntala said nothing. After a pause, Master repeated- "Did you hear the news about our son or not? This is the fruit of your upbringing."

Caught in a strange confusion, Shakuntala replied softly- "A son belongs to the father's share, a daughter to the mother's."

Her words struck something deep within him. A faint sense of regret passed through the Master's mind. Gathering himself, he said- "Before going to office this morning, Manoj did say something. He mentioned there would be a rally today to demand a

salary increase."

Shakuntala didn't understand much of it, so she remained quiet. The news of the arrest had left Master restless. Curiosity began to grow in his heart. His heartbeat quickened. He drank some salty water to settle himself and finished the remaining handful of roasted flattened rice. When his wife lifted the brass plate and started toward the courtyard, Master said- "Make the tea a little stronger today."

Without responding, Shakuntala went inside and said to her daughter-in-law- "Is the tea ready or still boiling? Add one more pinch of tea leaves."

The daughter-in-law, without speaking, dropped another pinch into the kettle and let it simmer. When it was ready, she strained it into a glass and, at her mother-in-law's signal, carried it toward the courtyard.

Sitting on the wooden cot by the doorway, Master kept turning things over in his mind. Thoughts circled around Manoj. Questions kept rising one after another.

Why had Manoj been arrested? Why taken to jail?

Until now, Manoj had never been to jail. So the thought of his arrest had never crossed Master Raghunandan's mind. Like any rumor that half convinces and half confuses, the news had left him

uncertain, some part of him believed it, some refused to.

All at once, memories of his father rose before him. He remembered how his father had thrown himself into the freedom movement at Gandhi's call, going from village to village, awakening the people to the idea of liberation from British rule. He remembered the days when his father and the villagers joined the Salt Satyagraha, making salt with their own hands in defiance of the law. He saw, in his mind's eye, the scene where the police arrived to stop them, and how his father, fearless, had stood his ground and said he would make the salt, come what may.

His father had been a man of strange courage. Where others hid in fear of the police, he stood tall, defiant, unyielding. The result was inevitable. The police officer first tried to stop him with threats, but he refused. The officer swore and shouted, but his father kept working.

There were four constables with the officer. They were Indians, while the officer himself was British. Two of them were blindly loyal to the colonial power, harsher even than the Englishman. But the other two carried a quiet flame of patriotism in their hearts, torn between duty and love of country. They did their work, but with lowered eyes, silently resisting in their own way.

In the end, when persuasion failed, the officer ordered the arrest. His father was taken and made to sit in the jeep. The villagers who had been with him slipped away quietly, afraid to face the police. Alone, his father was taken away, sitting upright in that jeep, proud even in custody.

Even when left alone, his father had faced the officer with his chest held high, replying boldly to every taunt. The more insolent the officer became, the firmer his father’s voice grew. The officer cursed him again and again, and for a while his father bore it in silence. But when his patience finally broke, he raised both his hands and slapped the officer hard on both cheeks.

That single act sealed his fate. The officer flew into a rage and ordered a brutal beating. Within moments, his father was dragged away to jail. A week later, the British court sentenced him to three years’ imprisonment.

As these memories ran through Master Raghunandan’s mind, his heart softened. A wave of emotion rose within him. The honor of his family, once earned through courage, sacrifice, and suffering, now seemed to tremble before his eyes. This was the same family that had endured insults, blows, and imprisonment for the dignity of the nation. And today, that same family, where was it heading?

The glow of his father's name still lived in the family's reputation. But now, unease stirred in his heart. As he sat lost in thought, a familiar voice broke the silence. It was Ramkhelawan, a peon from the Irrigation Department where Manoj worked.

The master knew him well, and Ramkhelawan too recognized the old teacher immediately. Seeing him at the door, Master asked-

"Ramkhelawan, how are things at your office?"

Ramkhelawan's face was heavy with worry, but he tried to steady his tone and replied- "Uncle, things aren't good at the office. Manoj has been arrested."

Ramkhelawan's words carried a different weight, a different story than what Master had heard earlier. Puzzled, Master asked-

"Why was Manoj arrested?"

By that time, Manoj's mother, Shakuntala, had come from the courtyard and stood by the doorway, listening.

Ramkhelawan said quietly- "Uncle, the situation in our department, I mean in the Irrigation Department, isn't good."

The master asked again- "What do you mean, not good?"

Ramhkelawan said-

"The Irrigation Department's work exists only

on paper."

The master wanted to ask more, but the thought of Manoj's arrest kept circling in his mind. So, setting aside other questions, he asked-

"What exactly is the reason for Manoj's arrest?"

Ramhkelawan replied- "He has been arrested on charges of cash embezzlement."

The words struck Master like a cold wind. Was Manoj truly guilty, or falsely accused? If he had taken money, where had it gone? He had not arranged a daughter's wedding, had not built a house, had not bought land. Then what could he have done? The master asked- "How much money are they saying he took?"

Ramhkelawan said- "I don't know the amount, but the departmental inquiry caught him."

Hearing this, Master fell silent. After a while, he looked toward his wife and said- "Did you hear about your son's doing?"

Shakuntala felt more wounded by her son's arrest than by the accusation itself. In her heart, she thought, government money is being looted everywhere. Perhaps, after a few days in jail, he would get bail. The case would drag on and fade with time. Yet the thought of an embezzlement charge–the shame of it–burned within her. It wasn't about money; it was about honour. Without a word, she

met her husband’s eyes. At that moment, Ramhkelawan quietly took his leave.

When their eyes met, Master’s heart trembled. He thought of the generation that had endured police batons and prison to build the family’s honour. And now this new generation had gone to jail accused of theft, of embezzling public money. Where had that inherited honour gone? Where had their patriotism disappeared?

Overwhelmed, the Master looked toward his wife and said- “Our family’s honour has been thrown into the water by our son.”

Shakuntala didn’t speak. The hurt in her heart found its way out through her eyes, as silent tears flowed down her cheeks. ❑

The Temple of Shiva

☰

From the heights of the Himalayas descends a stream, born of the snow-covered peaks, flowing downward through the rocky slopes, spreading into the plains and moving unhesitatingly toward the southern sea. Year after year, the monsoon rains accompany and renew its journey.

Unlike the muddy torrents of the Kosi or the Kamla, water of the Shivganga remains clear, pure, and tranquil. With a steady, tireless rhythm, the current moves on, day and night, to merge with the sea.

On the western bank of this river stands an ancient Shiva temple. No written record tells when it was first established, but people believe it to be very old. Generations have seen the stream flowing as it does now, those living and those long gone. The temple's origin belongs to a memory older than history, carried only in the words of the elders.

Behind the temple, the hillside slopes downward, gradually giving way to a level plain. On that plain lies a small village called Shivpuri, home to thirty or forty families. The oldest among them is Manishankar. His household consists of six members, his wife, two sons, and two daughters.

The other families of Shivpuri vary in size. Some have only a single member, man or woman alone. Some have two, husband and wife together. Others have children, making three, four, even five souls under one roof.

Since Shivpuri is a hilly village, neither a fixed language has yet taken root nor has any stable means of livelihood developed there. The people of Shivpuri have little connection with those of the more advanced plains villages. Yet, nine kilometers away, in the lowlands, lies a small market, and through trade with that market the villagers manage their daily needs. They buy and sell what they require, carrying down produce from their small fields and the colourful fruits that grow on the slopes. Whatever they earn through this small exchange becomes their means of survival.

Life in Shivpuri is far behind that of the plains in terms of comfort and progress, yet in simplicity and conduct the people stand ahead. They have not learned to disguise truth or falsehood. Their way of living rests entirely upon sincerity; deceit has not yet

entered their world.

It is true that being a poor, remote mountain village, Shivpuri lacks many necessities. Houses are makeshift, clothing is scarce, and proper food is often uncertain. Still, one cannot say that everyone suffers from illness. Yet by the time most people reach forty or fifty, life has already begun to fade from their bodies.

Even so, the winds of the changing world have begun to reach these hills. The influence of modern life–from cities down to the villages–has touched Shivpuri too, carried not by wealth or learning, but by imitation and the desire to belong to the larger world.

Fifteen kilometers from Shivpuri lies another village called Vicharpur. In that village lived two young people, Radha and Shyam. Since their high school days, they had taken a vow never to marry and decided to guide those persons or communities who are backward from them and their society.

One day, the people of Shivpuri gathered in the village square. After a long discussion, they agreed that Radha and Shyam should be invited to their village to share their thoughts on life and guide them toward a deeper understanding. The meeting ended with a single voice choosing Manishankar as the messenger.

"Baba," they said- "you are the eldest and the wisest among us. You must take this responsibility. Go to Vicharpur, bring Radha and Shyam here, and let us all learn from their vision of life."

Manishankar, respecting the will of the people, smiled and said-

"The thought you have spoken aloud today has long been in my heart. But seeing our people bound by old habits and blind customs, I kept my thoughts to myself. Now that this idea has awakened inside all of you, I will gladly help in every way I can."

His words filled the villagers with a sense of new hope. Early the next morning, Manishankar set out for Vicharpur. On the way, he passed through many villages and saw many kinds of people, each different in their customs and their ways of thinking.

When he finally reached the border of Vicharpur and stepped inside the village, he was amazed. The scene was unlike anything he had known. In Shivpuri, people were still divided by touch, by caste, by high and low rank. But here, in Vicharpur, there was none of that. People lived as equals, without barriers or pride.

Without asking many questions, Manishankar made his way to Radha's house. She was not at home. Her mother, Sulekshani, came forward and asked warmly- "Where have you come from,

brother?”

Manishankar replied- “From Shivpuri.”

The moment Sulekshani heard the word Shivpuri, she said nothing further. She went to the courtyard, brought a brass lota filled with water, and handed it to him.

“First wash your hands and feet,” she said kindly. “Radha will be here any moment.”

As she spoke, Manishankar washed his hands and feet and sat down on the small wooden seat near the doorway. Meanwhile, Sulekshani returned with a plate of light refreshments and placed it before him.

“You must be tired from the long walk,” she said. “And hungry too, I suppose. Please take breakfast first.”

The plate held flattened rice and puffed grains. Manishankar began to eat quietly. While he was still eating, Sulekshani looked toward the lane and said-

“Radha has come.”

Hearing her name, Manishankar hastened to finish his food. Radha came closer and greeted him warmly.

“Baba, where have you come from?” she asked.

“From Shivpuri,” he answered.

“How are things in your village?” she asked

again.

“My village lies in the hills,” Manishankar said. “As the people are poor, so there is scarcity of almost everything.”

Radha listened silently, her face thoughtful. After a short pause, Manishankar continued,

“My child, the people of our village sent me to you. They wish that you come one day to Shivpuri and speak in a public gathering. I have come to ask when you might spare the time.”

Radha fell quiet again, thinking. After a moment she asked-

“When do you want to hold the gathering?”

“Eight days from now,” said Manishankar. “That day is Shivratri. We plan to hold the meeting on the great rock before the temple. You, Shyam, and Sulekshani, all of you must come and share your thoughts with us, so that our people too may understand the meaning of life.”

Hearing Manishankar’s words, Radha glanced toward Shyam and then toward her mother, Sulekshani. With a gentle look, both of them signaled their agreement. Receiving their silent consent, Radha said- “Baba, please go back to your village and tell everyone–men, women, and children alike–that we will certainly come. In the meantime, we will begin preparing. Try to ensure that everyone in the

village attends the gathering. And also see that all sit together, eat together, and share food and water without any discrimination.”

Her words filled Manishankar’s heart with joy. He said- almost without realizing it- “Our village has long been cursed with untouchability. People refuse to eat together or even drink water touched by another’s hand. Yet, strangely, we have neither pond nor well. Everyone drinks the same water from the Shivganga and worships together in the same Shiva temple.”

It was the month of Phagun, the new moon day, and by coincidence, a Sunday. Early that morning, Radha, Shyam, and Sulekshani set out for Shivpuri. There was no vehicle to carry them, so they went on foot. After a four-hour journey, they reached the village.

Manishankar had already prepared the place before the temple–a stone platform under the great peepal tree–with mats spread out for sitting and resting. He welcomed them warmly and asked them to sit.

Sulekshani smiled and said- “First, let us wash our hands and feet in the Shivganga and offer prayers at the temple. Then we will sit.”

They did exactly that. Soon, all the villagers gathered together. For the first time, the entire

community shared a single meal, sitting side by side, breaking the long-held barriers of caste and separation.

By noon, the public meeting began, attended by everyone in the village. Manishankar presided over the gathering. As the speeches were about to start, Radha turned to him and said softly- “Let the people speak first, Baba. We will speak after hearing their thoughts.”

So it happened. Several villagers came up to the platform and began speaking about their daily troubles and hardships. When they finished, Sulekshani stood and said calmly-

“The problem is deep. Outsiders cannot solve it for you. Until the people of this village themselves take a step forward, they will continue to wander from door to door as they always have.”

Her words fell into the gathering like a quiet flame. People began looking at one another, as if the thought had struck a place long untouched in their minds. How could they have thought differently? Their village was a hilly, closed within its own silence, where life had been confined to the self and the familiar.

After speaking, Sulekshani sat down. The men and women in the crowd began whispering among themselves, saying they had never before heard such

thoughts. For some, her words took hold deeply; for others, their meaning slipped by, half understood.

Radha and Shyam listened in silence, absorbing everything. The villagers' scattered voices and the faint stir of awakening made something clear in their minds. Radha thought, the problems that choke society cannot be solved by society alone. They are tied to the system itself.

There is a saying "When a house divides, a fool loots". As long as the people remain divided, no change will come. Only when they rise together, united, will the machinery of power begin to resist them. The moment resistance appears, the struggle becomes real, and in that struggle lies strength.

But such strength can come only through thought, through awareness. And awareness, she felt, can only grow from the deep experience of one's own hardships. That is why it is essential first to strengthen life from within, to make the roots of thought firm, so that every step forward rests on understanding, not fear. Radha's thoughts flowed steadily. She believed that the stronger people became in their understanding, the stronger their inner spirit would grow. And as their inner strength awakened, so too would their courage to fight. Society, weakened by years of decay, had grown so impure that cleansing it would not be easy. Yet, she

thought, if a person acts with firm resolve and a clear conscience, even the deepest corruption can be erased.

After Sulekshani finished her speech, Shyam stood up to address the gathering. His voice was calm but carried the force of conviction.

“Dear friends,” he began- “when you rise to confront the obstacles in your lives, do not think that the government will sit silently and watch. It will resist you with all its might. And so, you must prepare yourselves with equal strength. The truth is this: the difficulties you face will not disappear on their own. Unless you fight them, your well-being will remain a dream. The movement that begins with your awakening today is no longer a whisper of doubt or hesitation, it is becoming a storm, a struggle for liberation. The time has come to stand face to face with power and claim your own freedom.”

The sound of applause filled the air, echoing long after his words ended. When Shyam sat down, the rhythm of clapping slowly subsided. Then Radha rose to speak.

As she stood, the people welcomed her with another wave of applause. When the noise faded, she spoke with quiet strength.

“Brothers and sisters, the greatest strength in

your community is your unity. You are not like other groups divided into oppressors and oppressed. Where you live, the conditions of life are the same for all. That is why your welfare is certain, if you remain together.

But remember this always: many kinds of temptations will be shown to you by those in power. Do not be deceived by them. There is no honesty in the leaders who govern; there is a vast gulf between what they say and what they do. We are with you. Your welfare, your freedom, lies in your own hands."❑

A New Beginning in a Withered Life

☰

The class was in progress.

In the ninth grade, the teacher was teaching when the peon came close and whispered softly,

“The Headmaster has said that Ganesh should be given leave.”

Hearing this, the teacher called out,

“Ganesh, come here.”

Ganesh stepped forward, and the teacher said-

“You are being given leave.”

In every school–whether high, middle, or primary–an ordinary student feels happy when he gets permission to leave. Ganesh too felt that same joy. Carrying his books and notebooks, he left for home.

But Ganesh did not know that his parents had

just died in an accident.

After he went to school, his mother Alodhni and father Yashodhar went to the market together. On the way, both were crushed by a speeding truck. The driver, drunk and reckless, struck them and fled. No one saw the incident, nor did the driver stop.

The road to the market was usually busy, filled with passersby. After a short while, a man returning from the market came by. He saw two people lying on the road, lifeless, their bodies mangled under the truck's wheels. They were unrecognizable.

Standing near the bodies, the man cried out for help. His shouts brought people rushing from every direction, those from the nearby houses and others on their way to the market. But no one had seen the truck. The driver, fearing for his life, had not stopped even for a moment. He had pressed harder on the accelerator and vanished down the road.

People began to gather, first a few, then more, until the crowd swelled like a fairground.

When the bodies were turned over, they were finally recognized: it was the couple from Raghopur, Yashodhar and his wife.

The news spread like wildfire in the scorching air of Baisakh and Jeth.

Within no time, it reached even the teachers of the high school at Raghopur, a mile away.

There were eleven teachers in that school. Everyone heard the news, but it struck the Headmaster most deeply.

He was shaken to the core, trembling as he heard it.

It was not only that the dead were the parents of one of his students, he himself was childless.

All eleven teachers had families of their own. Each had a different kind of life, a different pattern at home, but Hemant Babu's home was unlike anyone else's.

Some of the teachers often complained of family troubles, but Hemant Babu's troubles were different. His worry was being childless.

He lived alone, for fate had not granted him siblings either.

Friends and colleagues in the school and the village had told him many times to marry again, but Hemant Babu never agreed.

Now he was well past fifty-five, perhaps nearing fifty-six.

That day, the news of the accident did not just reach his ears, it struck something deep within him, stirring an ache long buried beneath the calm surface of a teacher's life.

Hearing about the death of Yashodhar and his wife, Hemant Babu turned numb, as if stripped of all

feelings. His mind was in turmoil. Thoughts rose and burst within him like bubbles in rainwater. Ganesh seemed to have sunk deep into his heart. Just as parents are the creators of a child, a teacher is the giver of knowledge and, in that sense, a second parent.

He thought Ganesh may be Yashodhar's son, but he is also my student, as dear to me as a son.

What would become of that child now?

The more Hemant Babu sank into the depth of this thought, the more restless he became. A tremor ran through his body. Finally, he announced a holiday at the school. Afterward, both teachers and students went their own ways, but Hemant Babu went to visit Ganesh.

Yashodhar had no close relative to mourn him, but the people of the village wept. Little Ganesh, lost in confusion and shock, sat silent and motionless. Words would not come out of his mouth.

Society, despite all its flaws and growing loneliness, still holds enough humanity to stand together in moments like this. People gathered in sympathy. One man offered money to buy the shroud and a piece of cloth. Another went to the market to bring the cloth. Someone else gave bamboo for the bier. Yet another provided wood for the pyre.

And so, as everyone helped in their own way, the preparations for the cremation were completed before long. After the pyre burned down, the villagers together took charge of all the remaining rituals.

The funeral rites of Yashodhar and his wife were performed properly, with full respect and ceremony.

It was the fifteenth day after the death of Yashodhar and his wife. The Satyanarayan ritual had been performed the previous day. Only Ganesh’s maternal uncle and aunt, along with his cousin brother, were still in Raghopur.

Among themselves, that is, between Ganesh’s maternal uncle, aunt, and cousin, discussions were going on about what should be done for Ganesh’s future. Financially, neither family was in a good position. Neither his uncle nor his cousin’s household could afford to bear the expenses of his upbringing and education. Yet they all felt a quiet concern that Ganesh was now thirteen or fourteen years old, old enough perhaps to find some work and manage his own life.

They thought that if fate had brought such a disaster upon this poor boy, then he would have to find a way to live somehow. When he grew older, he would marry, have a family, and live in his village like others.

While the conversation was still going on between Ganesh's uncle and cousin, Gopinath arrived. As soon as he came in, he said to Ganesh's uncle,

"I will be leaving for Mumbai on the fourth day. I will take Ganesh with me."

Gopinath was a young man from the same village. Strong in body and upright in thought, he was known for his honesty and hard work. He had been living in Mumbai for ten years. In the beginning, when he first went there, he did not have much education, so he could not get an office job. He started as a laborer in a factory.

Gopinath worked diligently and kept a spotless character. After three years, the factory owner, impressed by his conduct, took him to work at his own house. From then on, Gopinath lived with the family as one of their own.

He became so trustworthy that the owner treated him almost like a family member, sharing with him household matters and even personal concerns. No one in the neighborhood ever thought of Gopinath as a servant. Unlike other workers, he did not receive a fixed monthly salary. The owner paid him generously, according to his needs and his sincerity.

Through hard work and integrity, Gopinath had

earned not only a livelihood but also deep respect. His decision to take Ganesh with him was born of compassion and perhaps, somewhere in his heart, a quiet wish to give that orphaned boy a new beginning.

Hearing Gopinath's proposal, Ganesh's maternal uncle said-

"I may be his uncle by relation, but you too are a brother of this community. Just as I wish for the survival of Ganesh's fading family, so do you. If the boy is getting a place and purpose in life, then there is no harm in taking him to Mumbai."

After listening to his uncle, Ganesh's cousin Gangaram said-

"Gopinath, a poor man's hope is always tied to someone stronger. Even a little help from everyone can lift his life again. He is only thirteen or fourteen. If he gets support for five or seven years, his life will stand on its feet again, and his family will one day be like it was when his parents were alive."

Gopinath thought silently, When people give a handful of rice or a little food to a beggar, they call it charity. But to rebuild someone's life, to make them capable of living again, that is a greater act of charity than any gift.

He said to himself, If I can bring light back into Ganesh's life, what greater act of righteousness

could there be?

Turning to Ganesh, he said aloud,

"Boy, you will not have to worry about anything. I will take care of everything. Be ready the day after tomorrow. We will take the train together."

Ganesh's uncle also said gently-

"Son, come with me today. Stay with us tomorrow, and the day after, leave with Gopinath."

Ganesh went with his uncle to his maternal home.

On the third day, he returned and left with Gopinath for Mumbai, carrying nothing but a small bundle of clothes and a heart full of uncertainty, stepping from the ashes of loss toward the unknown promise of a new life.

Time moved on in its own rhythm.

When they reached Mumbai, Gopinath told his employer everything and arranged a job for Ganesh under his supervision. Ganesh began to work earnestly.

For seven days, Gopinath said nothing to him. On the eighth day, in the quiet of the evening after their work was done, Gopinath spoke gently-

"Ganesh, you are still a boy, but remember, this is Mumbai. Do not get carried away by its glitter. Focus on building your life."

Ganesh replied- “Brother, whatever you say, I will do.”

Gopinath continued- “Work hard through the day. At night, when there is no work, study for three or four hours. You lived all this while depending on your parents. They are gone now, so learn to depend on yourself.”

Ganesh took Gopinath’s words to heart and began shaping his life with quiet determination.

Time passed.

Before long, five years went by in Mumbai. During all this time, Ganesh never drew a single month’s salary for himself, nor did he buy even a piece of clothing from his own earnings. He let Gopinath handle everything and followed his guidance completely.

In those five years, Gopinath went home three or four times, but Ganesh never once returned to the village.

After five years, he had grown into a young man. Without keeping a penny of Ganesh’s wages for himself, Gopinath went to the employer and said- “Sir, please help settle Ganesh’s household now.”

The employer smiled and said- “Very well!”

And so, the young Ganesh returned to his village with Gopinath. They built a small house of three rooms. When the house was completed, a

wedding date was fixed.

Before the procession was to leave, Ganesh went to the same school he had once left as a boy, met the teachers, and stood before Headmaster Hemant Babu with folded hands. He invited him personally to attend.

Smiling warmly, Hemant Babu said-

“Ganesh, your withered life has truly found a new beginning. Whether others go to your wedding or not, I certainly will.”

And thus, the boy once orphaned and adrift had, through perseverance, found not only work and home, but also the blessing of renewal, the new vessel of hope in his once dried-up life. ❑

Silence

☰

It had already been three days since I arrived from Biratnagar, yet I still had not managed to meet Fachair Kaka. A doubt arose in my mind, perhaps he was not in the village, or maybe he was unwell. When I inquired, I learned that he was indeed in the village and perfectly fine.

Ten years ago, before I moved to Biratnagar, I used to sit with him almost every day for hours. We would talk about everything, from personal matters to family, society, and the world at large. Those memories are still alive within me, as vivid as ever.

But since settling in Biratnagar, I barely return to the village for twenty-five or thirty days in a year. And even then, it is usually for some urgent work, which leaves little time to sit and talk with him. Still, whenever I could spare a few moments, I made sure to meet him, for those conversations always left my mind refreshed.

Fachair Kaka is the most talkative man in the

village. Once you start a topic with him, he can go on for an hour without a single pause, no comma, no full stop. Whether he is answering your question or simply sharing his own thoughts, it becomes difficult to tell. He can repeat his stories endlessly, even if they are about his in-laws' family.

He has this habit, some call it a flaw, some a trait, of speaking on his own, uninvited, as soon as he sees someone. People often say he mutters to himself or talks too much without purpose. But I have never believed that.

Fachair Kaka must be about eighteen or twenty years older than I am. And so my heart readily accepts that he has seen and experienced far more of the world, its joys and its sorrows, than I have. How could such a man speak falsehood?

In short, know this much that a person like Fachair Kaka is not only in our village of Kisanepur, but also in others.

In the village, people called Fachair Kaka by many names. Some said Fachair Kaka, some Fachair Bhaiya, some Fachair Bhai, and others even called him Fachair Baba. In short, depending on the kind of relation, whether by kinship or social regard, each addressed him accordingly, but everyone used the name Fachair.

His real name was Raudilal, but just as scholars

of scripture are known as Pandit and school teachers as Shikshak, so he is known as Fachair because of his talkative nature. From his early school days, when he studied at the lower primary level, people had been calling him by that name, and it stayed with him ever since. Whatever others might say, I still call him Fachair Kakka.

Three days ago, after arriving in the village, I began to feel uneasy about not having met him yet. So today, I decided to visit him. As I thought about it, memories came rushing back, how we used to meet daily, sometimes three or four times a day, and even then, hours would pass listening to his endless stories. Now, it has been a whole year without seeing him. I wondered how long today's meeting might last.

After some thought, I decided it would be best to visit him in the evening. By that time, he too would have finished his day's meals and rest. Quietly, I made up my mind that today, in the evening, I would go and meet Fachair Kaka.

Fachair Kakka's house was about five bighas away from mine. It was a bright moonlit night, and since the arrival of electricity, the night now looked no different from day. There was another advantage too. The thick pakhari tree (Ficus Virens) that once stood by the roadside, where ghosts were said to dwell, had been cut down. So there was no fear or

obstruction left along the way.

It was the second evening since my arrival. I set out to meet Fachair Kakka. I had barely walked ten steps when I saw someone approaching from the opposite direction. I could see the face but could not recognize him at first. The man spoke,

"When did you come to the village, Gangaram?"

The familiar voice made me realize it was Rajindra Bhai. I said-

"I came the day before yesterday. How are things on your side, Rajindra Bhai?"

He replied-

"All good. Where are you heading?"

I said-

"I'm going to meet Fachair Kakka. How are things at home and in the village?"

Rajindra Bhai smiled faintly and said-

"What could be new, Gangaram? The same old story. The finger millet bread that people once despised has now become a delicacy. Just as gentlemen proudly attach 'Shri' before their names, even finger millet now carries that honor and has regained its place on the table."

Hearing this, I couldn't help but smile. The very millet once eaten by the poor had now become food for the rich. But instead of commenting on it, I

simply said- "Bhai Sahib, in the village women still say, 'One who follows his own whim calls his wife, sister-in-law."

Rajindra Bhai said-

"Yes, everyone is the master of his own mind. Whatever a person feels like doing, he does, and he says whatever comes to his tongue. But leave all that talk. You're still living in Biratnagar, right?"

I replied- "Yes."

Rajindra Bhai continued- "In the old days, people used to go to Biratnagar on foot to harvest paddy or jute. Some went there for trade or labor. There were no vehicles then; they walked all the way. But now there are all kinds of transport. These days, even ordinary workers fly to Europe, America, and the Arab countries, and you're still living in Biratnagar?"

I said- "Bhai, you know me well enough that how religious I am. How could I leave a religious land and go to work in a godless one? Biratnagar is a town of sacred country."

He asked- "How so?"

I replied- "Bhai, you haven't been to Biratnagar, that's why you don't know. There, wherever you go, you see places of worship. People tie red cloth on banyan trees, offer flowers and leaves, and make their vows. On the roadside too, you'll see small

stones placed carefully and decorated with flowers and offerings. Now tell me yourself, how could I leave such a holy land and go to work in another country?"

Rajindra Bhai said nothing. I could sense that he was uneasy, perhaps unsure how to respond. Since he was standing ahead of me on the path, he couldn't have just said- "I won't listen to your reasoning." Restlessly, he said-

"Gangaram, I have some work right now. If I'm late, it'll cause trouble. You go meet Fachair Kaka, and I'll go take care of this. We'll talk tomorrow in peace."

I walked ahead. Fachair Kaka was standing at the doorway. As I reached him, I said-

"Kaka, I touch your feet."

Without saying anything, he bent his head slightly, gave his blessing, and motioned with his eyes for me to sit down.

Seeing his behavior, a doubt rose in my mind. Perhaps he was unwell, either in body or in mind. I asked- "Kaka, are you feeling all right?"

He replied- "For some time, yes, I wasn't well in mind, but now everything is fine."

I could not make sense of his words and said-

"Kaka, I don't quite understand what you mean."

Suddenly, Fachair Kaka grew serious. In a deep,

calm voice, he said- “My boy, just as there is value in speech, there is also meaning and worth in silence. Notice that when two enlightened souls meet, words become fewer, and gestures become deeper. It means that at such moments, expression through action holds greater weight than speech itself.”

I still could not fully grasp his thought, so I asked again-

“Kaka, I still don’t understand what you mean.”

Wanting to make me understand better, Fachair Kaka asked- “Have you heard of Kabir Das?”

I replied- “Yes. In the medieval period, just as Tulsidas and Surdas were saints of the Saguna tradition, Kabir Das and Malik Muhammad Jayasi belonged to the Nirguna path. Kabir followed the way of knowledge, while Jayasi followed the way of love.”

Nodding his head slowly, Fachair Kaka said- “Yes, then listen to an incident from Kashi.”

The word Kashi startled me. After all, Kashi had always been regarded as the seat of learning and wisdom. It was home to a great council of scholars where five hundred learned men resided, each a master in his own subject. I asked- “What happened there?”

Fachair Kaka began- “One day, Farid came to Kashi. Farid was a man of self-realization. News of his

arrival spread quickly. Kabir too lived in Kashi at that time. His disciples told him, 'Guru Maharaj, since Farid has come, you should meet him.' Kabir accepted their suggestion.

The path to Farid's lodging passed right by Kabir's place. Before Farid and his followers arrived, Kabir and his disciples went and stood on the roadside, waiting. Farid, of course, knew who Kabir was. When he came before Kabir, Kabir invited him to stop and sit, with nothing but a gesture of his eyes."

Hearing this, my heart filled with wonder, and I couldn't help exclaiming- "Wonderful! Truly wonderful!"

Fachair Kaka continued- "For three days, Kabir and Farid stayed face to face, but neither spoke a single word."

He fell silent after that. For a moment, I too remained quiet, then said-

"Kaka, the evening bells are ringing in the temple. I will take your leave now and we'll talk again tomorrow."

Fachair Kaka said softly,

"Let me say one last thing. We will talk in detail another day. Until a year or so ago, I suffered from the disease of talking too much. I would speak endlessly about anything and everything. But after

finding true company and realizing the nature of the self, I have come to understand the value of silence."

I asked-

"Kaka, what is the virtue of silence?"

He replied-

"We'll discuss it in detail another day. For now, understand only this much: silence strengthens the power of knowledge. When knowledge deepens, thoughts subside. When thoughts subside, life becomes free of conflict. And when conflict ends, ego dissolves. In that state, one's strength itself becomes one's protection. That is enough for today." ❑

The Reversed Wind

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Just as nature holds both virtue and flaw within itself, so too does human nature. When the virtues within a person rise and overflow, the mind becomes calm and delightful, like a season touched by a gentle, favorable breeze. But when flaws dominate, that same nature turns harsh and painful, just as a storm turns pleasant weather into suffering.

Nature constantly moves between virtue and vice, and so does the human temperament. It swings between goodness and its opposite, producing the best of beauty and the worst of ugliness. This is not something new; it has always been so and will always remain so. The only difference is that when the tide of goodness swells, everything feels elevated, and when it ebbs, life sinks into baseness.

Shyam Babu and his wife Anuradha were both teachers. Shyam Babu taught in a middle school, while Anuradha worked at a high school. This was

not a case where the wife was more qualified than the husband or the husband less educated than the wife. Shyam Babu held an M.A., and his wife was a B.A., B.Ed.

The problem of employment in the country is not new. It existed in the past, continues in the present, and who can say how long it will persist. During the days of the freedom struggle, when India was rising against British rule, the slogan among the people was-

“All wealth belongs to the government, rice, lentils, and vegetables too.” But after independence, when power actually came into the people’s hands, that spirit was forgotten. Today, that sentiment lies buried like a faded line in the pages of history.

Still, one truth remains: the power of the nation lies, for better or worse, in the hands of its own people.

When Shyam Babu was pursuing his M.A., his heart was full of dreams. He was certain that he would become a college professor someday. Never once did it occur to him that he might end up teaching in a high school or middle school. But after completing his M.A., when he had to face five long years of unemployment, the night sky itself seemed to lose its stars, and even in daylight, everything appeared dim. In the end, exhausted and defeated, he came to the quiet realization that any kind of job

would do.

While still in college, Shyam Babu had been married. After earning his degree and finding no job, his own despair deepened, but even more crushing were the silent reproaches of his parents and his educated wife. The hope he had carried all along began to crack and crumble like dry earth under a scorching sun. But after some months of waiting, he finally secured a job as a teacher in a middle school.

Anuradha, his wife, completed her B.A. and later earned a B.Ed. Her father worked as a clerk in the Kosi Project. In families accustomed to service, especially in those where government jobs were seen as marks of stability and pride, the idea of employment was deeply rooted. Anyone capable of work was expected to hold a job.

The older generation had believed in self-reliance, building one's own livelihood through individual effort, living freely, and serving society with independence of thought. But such ideals have faded from people's minds. Either they have been forgotten, or buried under the weight of habit, or worn so thin by daily struggle that they are now breaking apart.

Then came the wave of women's reservation in education. That wind blew in Anuradha's favor, and she became a teacher in a high school. For a while afterward, people teased Shyam Babu, saying that

he taught in a middle school while his wife worked in a high school. But what could reasoning do against the stubborn wind of circumstance?

Shyam Babu no longer found joy in teaching. His heart was not in it, yet what else could he do? He had to keep teaching. The reason for his disinterest was clear. From his student days, he had firmly believed that he would teach in a college. From high school onward, he had worked hard with that goal in mind. His matriculation results were excellent, he earned distinction in his B.A. (Honours), and he ranked well in his M.A. too.

But the heat of life scorched all that effort. The middle school's teaching environment was too simple for his scholarly temperament, and simplicity often irritates a serious thinker. Moreover, when one's work does not align with one's aspirations, a dullness seeps into life. That dullness had gripped Shyam Babu completely. His heart no longer found meaning in the classroom.

Yet life is life; everyone must carry their own share of its burden. And to live, one must earn. That necessity alone kept him going.

Time kept moving forward. Shyam Babu reached the latter end of his service. Only eight months were left before his retirement. The nearness of that day brought new thoughts and worries. What would life be like afterward? His

income, the salary that sustained him, would soon be cut in half. With age would come ailments and the helplessness of old age. How would the future unfold?

Still, there was a quiet comfort in knowing that his wife earned her own income. She was seven years younger, and even after his retirement, her salary would continue to support them.

They had three sons and two daughters. The two daughters were older, and the three sons younger. Shyam Babu had managed to educate his daughters up to matriculation and then marry them off with dignity. Both were now well settled in their marital homes.

The eldest son, the third child, has completed engineering. The two younger sons are still studying in college. Until today, Shyam Babu has carried the household on his shoulders: he performed his parents' death rites, ran the family, educated and married off his daughters, and is still educating his sons. He also managed to build a proper house for the family. Some minor work in the house remains unfinished, but the home is livable and secure.

When Shyam Babu's father Raghuvansh neared death, his body fell prey to various ailments. After three years of sickness laid out on a bed, he died. Two years after the father's death, the mother passed away. She did not suffer the same long

illnesses as her husband, yet she sank into deep grief after his death. Everyone knows that whoever is born on earth must one day die. People say this, accept it, and speak of it day and night.

After his parents' death, Shyam Babu performed the rites and the feasts properly. In society, a daughter's marriage is treated like a monstrous event, and similarly the death rites follow their prescribed course. Shyam Babu believed that the more sincerely and lavishly one performs the shraddha rites for parents, the greater the comfort and blessings one secures in the next life. With that conviction he spent freely on his parents' ceremonies. He spent within reason and did not fall into debt, yet the money that had been in the bank dwindled away.

I had not seen Shyam Babu for seven or eight days and missed meeting him. Today is Sunday and the school is closed. I decided to visit him this evening.

The sun had already set. After finishing my own work and helping my family settle for the evening, I left to visit Shyam Babu. As I walked along the road, various thoughts passed through my mind. By the time I reached his house, I was still wondering how he was doing.

He was sitting at the doorway. The moment I

saw him, all my earlier worries–that perhaps he had fallen ill–vanished from my mind. I had barely stepped into the courtyard when Shyam Babu said-

“Rupalal, I was just thinking that it’s been a week since we last met. I was planning to come see you, and here you are already.”

I listened to his words while quietly observing his face. The color of his expression told me that he was burdened with some worry. Yet I thought to myself that once we started talking, he would surely share everything, as he always did.

Without saying much, I sat down beside him and said-

“Shyam Babu, it’s been many days since we last met, and I was missing our talks. How have you been? Is everything fine?”

Shyam Babu replied-

“Yes, everything is fine, bu–t...”

When Shyam Babu said “but,” he suddenly fell silent. I wondered why he had stopped mid-sentence. Trying to ease the pause, I changed the topic and said-

“Your retirement must be quite near now?”

He replied-

“Only eight months left. I keep thinking what I’ll do afterward, how I’ll manage.”

To lighten his thoughts, I said- "You are a capable man, Shyam Babu. I'm sure you've already planned what to do next."

My words seemed to strike him sharply. He sighed and said- "Rupalal, when the wind turns the wrong way, just as nature loses its harmony, so does one's own life..."

He stopped again. His silence made me feel that something serious had happened at home, something he was reluctant to speak about. I asked quietly- "What do you mean by 'your own,' Shyam Babu?"

His voice trembled with pain as he said- "Rupalal, you know what my life has been so far. But now..."

I interrupted gently-

"Shyam Babu, whatever it is, there's nothing to hide from me. You've done everything one could, performed your parents' last rites with devotion, raised your children, married off your daughters, and built a home through honest effort. There are very few sons in the village who have served their family as faithfully as you."

He looked down and said slowly- "Rupalal, all that I've done seems to be washing away like water."

His words filled me with concern. Without thinking, I asked- "What do you mean, Shyam Babu?"

He replied- his voice breaking- “Rupalal, it pains me to say it, but silence will not help either, so I’ll tell you. My eldest son speaks to me as if I were a stranger. He says, ‘What have you ever done? Show me the account of your earnings!’ And what hurts even more is that my wife sides with him. Tell me, what stronger sign of a reversed wind could there be?”

Hearing this, my heart felt as if struck by a heavy stone and my voice froze inside my mouth.

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Glossary

Baba - Grandfather

Bhai- Brother

Bigha- A unit for land measurement approximately 12, 450 sq ft in a bigha.

Jal-Tarpan- A Hindu ritual in which water, barley grains, black sesame seeds, halfa grass (Kush), and flowers are offered with sacred chants to departed ancestors. It is performed by the family to settle ancestral debts (Pitra Dosh) for the peace, prosperity, and well-being of the family.

Kaka- Uncle

Kachari- A deep-fried snack from Mithilanchal. It is prepared by marinating chopped onion, green chilli, gram flour or grass pea flour, turmeric powder, salt and some other spices with water. It is then deep-fried in vegetable oil till golden brown and crispy.

Mātranavamī- It is the ninth day of the waning moon phase during Pitṛpaksha. On this day, Śrāddha, jal-tarpan, and pind-daan are performed specifically for the deceased female lineage of a family which ensures liberation of the departed soul and

reduction of the karmic debts (pitru rin) of the living.

Nah-kesh- A Hindu funerary ritual, particularly in the Mithilanchal region, in which close female relatives of the deceased cut their nails and male relatives shave their heads along with nails as an expression of mourning.

Pind-daan- A Hindu funeral and post-funeral ritual in which Pinds (bolls) are offered to deceased ancestors by family members. The Pinds are made of unboiled rice flour, sesame seeds, water from the holy Ganga River, ghee, milk and honey. It is performed to seek peace and liberation for the departed soul, as well as to ensure the well-being of living family members.

Pitṛpaksha- A sixteen-day lunar period in a month of Aasin during which Hindus perform Shradhkarma.

Puja- Worship

Purnakal- A day which comes after the full moon.

Śrāddha-karma- A set of funeral rituals performed for the peace and liberation of departed souls in Hindu tradition.

Varshīk Karma- An annual sraddha ritual performed on the death anniversary of a departed soul. In the Maithil tradition, it is performed continuously for five years following the individual's passing.

Appendix

Mithila Lunar Calendar

Chait:	March–April
Baishakh:	April–May
Jeth:	May–June
Asadh:	June–July
Saon:	July–August
Bhado:	August–September
Aasin:	September–October
Katik:	October–November
Agahan:	November–December
Poos:	December–January
Magh:	January–February
Fagun:	February–March

Notes